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THE MESSAGE OF GOD

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THE MESSAGE OF GOD

BY THE REV.

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I

THE SPEECH OF GOD

"But the word of the Lord abideth for ever. And this is the word of good tidings which was preached unto you."—1 PETER i. 25.

I

THE first thing to be proclaimed and emphasized on the strength of this passage and of many others, is that there is such a thing in human experience as the speech of the Eternal God; and unless that be a fact the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation is a fraud. It rests absolutely upon a long series of delusions or upon false evidence. One of the very earliest statements in its first book, concerning man newly created, is, "They heard the voice of the Lord God in the garden." One of its very latest is, "I heard a great voice out of the midst of the throne," and the pages in between are crowded with people who declare, or of whom it is declared, that they heard the voice of God. It cannot be too plainly affirmed that unless God spoke to Abraham and Jacob and Moses and Joshua, to Samuel and Elijah, to Isaiah and Ezekiel, to Psalmist and prophet, the Bible is a lying record, a tissue of misstatements, or at best of cunningly devised fables,

Within recent years a man of some influence in England has loudly proclaimed his disbelief in the existence of any Heavenly Father, and he has further been understood to declare that Jesus Christ never existed. That last seems to me to be the speech of a man who is blind and deaf, angrily biased against the Christian faith, who does not know and therefore declares.

It should be ours to inquire reverently and patiently, to investigate and consider, and to weigh evidence, to look at the great facts such as the Lord's day, the Christian Church, and the Christian gospel with its undoubted regenerating power. Let it be emphatically affirmed that where Christian faith has been proclaimed and accepted—accepted, mark you, and not merely professed—it has invariably tended to make men better: the false man true, the foul man clean, the mean man generous; that as the apostle saw it at work, and as it has been seen at work since, it purifies and exalts and transfigures human character. And the Christian faith like the Christian Scriptures rests upon this unfaltering declaration that God speaks to men. I put the verb in the present tense—"speaks," not merely "spoke." Where does He speak? Doubtless in nature and history and conscience. For the moment let it be affirmed that He speaks in the Bible, which I still regard as the final court of appeal, the fountain, the arbiter, and the judge of the message of the Church to-day.

To me there is nothing more certain about the Bible than the fact that it is a modern book. Old as the world in its story, it is still fresh as the dawn or the new spring. It still "finds" men. Its message concerning the character of God, the

needs and sorrows, the longings and possibilities and sins of men is a living message.

"The word of the Lord abideth," not merely in the sense—as sometimes understood—of getting its sayings proved and fulfilled in history, but in the sense in which verse 23 speaks, "it *liveth* and abideth." It grips the heart of men. God still speaks through its pages. It stirs the conscience, comforts sorrow, heals the broken heart, inspires to worthy living. It is eternally true in the heart of its message, and it is sufficient. Let no Christian preacher or teacher distrust it, nor accept any substitute for it. To the spiritually awake, and even to the spiritually dead, it still speaks, and it can be made a book of fascinating and thrilling interest, as in days of old, to the man who knows its contents and comes under their spell. For myself I have preached from nothing else for thirty years, and it grows more wonderful as the days pass by.

We are sometimes warned against Bibliolatry. There is no need of the warning. It is a sin of which neither the world nor the Church is in the slightest danger at the present moment. We are urged to examine the claims of the Bible for itself. Let us do so without hesitation. Turn to verse 23 again. There is a claim. Men are "born again by the word of God." Paul declares to Timothy that the "Scriptures are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith" (2 Tim. iii. 15). James claims that "the implanted word is able to save your souls" (James i. 21). And the truth of these great statements is attested through all the history of the Christian Church.

When I am asked, therefore, to regard the Bible precisely as I regard any other great book, I am

unable to accept the invitation. I can never regard the Bible apart from its achievements. I think of the sorrows it has healed, the tyrannies it has broken and overthrown, the enmities it has slain, the sweet and sacred relationships and the noble enthusiams it has created, the evils it has destroyed, the strong and splendid characters which it has nurtured and moulded, the glorious hopes which it has inspired, and much more. I see it as the hero of ten thousand fights, with armour dusty and dinted but still victorious, and I am not able to regard it in the same light as the newest stripling of philosophy boastfully buckling on its armour, and which has yet to prove itself. There are no words in human language like the words of Christ, and there is no book like the book in which they are found. In its light and life and power it abideth for ever.

II

Secondly, I notice the apparent narrowness of the apostle's statement: "This is the word of good tidings which was preached unto you." He seems to be ignoring the Old Testament. Really he is not. He is writing to people many of whom believed firmly enough that the oracles of God were to be found in the Old Testament. Their difficulty, probably, was the difficulty of many people to-day—it was a common difficulty of New Testament times, viz., that of believing that God's speech was to be found in the lips of living men. The writer seems to be insisting on this. That is how I, at any rate, interpret the text. He boldly appropriates a word from the Old Testament prophecies in favour of the men who have preached

the gospel among these people, and claims that their word therefore was the word of the Lord the living message of the living Christ. And who were the preachers? It was not Peter who had preached the word in two of the districts named in the introduction to this letter. We all know who had been the leader in Evangelism in Galatia and Asia, and we know who were some of his colleagues. It means that Paul, Silas, Barnabas, Apollos, Timothy, and others more obscure than they had spoken the word of the Lord.

Saving Paul, no speech of any of the others is recorded in the New Testament. You see where we are being carried—(1) there was many a word of God spoken in that time which is not recorded; and (2) a man's interpretation of the New Testament may be a part of the living and enduring word. If in that day, why not in this? Why may not a man to-day have immediacy of vision?

"God is not dead that He should speak no more.
If thou hast wanderings in the wilderness
And find'st not Sinai, 'tis thy soul is poor.
There towers the mountain of the voice no less
Which he who seeks shall find.

Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,
And not on paper leaves or leaves of stone;
Each age, each kindred adds a verse to it,
Texts of despair or hope, of joy or moan.
While swings the sea, while mists the mountains shroud,
While thunder's surges burst on cliffs of cloud,
Still at the prophet's feet the nations sit."

Do not let us fall into the error of the Jews in the time of Christ of believing in every age except their own, of thinking that God only spoke to men in the past, and so becoming blind

to the presence of the Word made flesh dwelling among them. God speaks by His written word, believe that. Believe also that He speaks by His living spirit. Men have often said to the preacher, "Your word of last Sunday was a message of God to my soul." Why not? Do we not pray with F. R. Havergal:

> "Lord, speak to me that I may speak
> In living echoes of Thy tone"?

If my work is to be all that it may be I must believe that God can speak by me to the souls of men. That the word of preacher and Sunday-school teacher may be as truly the message of God as the word of Isaiah or Ezekiel, of Paul or John, and it may be clothed with the same regenerating power. Do believe that a man may be to you and to others a living oracle of God, and that, by his word, men may be rescued from frivolity or despair, from folly and sin, and may be converted to God. Let us believe in modern preaching and teaching as a present ordinance of God.

> "Not only olden ages felt
> The presence of the Lord;
> Not only with the Fathers dwelt
> The Spirit of the Word.
>
> Doth not Spirit still descend
> And bring the heavenly fire;
> Doth He not still His Church extend
> And waiting souls inspire?"

III

Note, in the third place, the writer's definition of the Word of the Lord which these people had heard. "The word of the gospel," or "of good

tidings." That, of course, is the technical name which we give to the first four books of the New Testament. The good news or the good message. The good message according to Matthew or Mark or Luke or John. We believe that they were inspired of God to write this good message, and that after them Paul was inspired of the same Spirit to write his imperishable letters; and while it be stedfastly affirmed that God speaks to men to-day, let it be also affirmed that the religious speech and teaching of to-day must be tested by the message of the New Testament. "Which shall I obey," demanded Mary Queen of Scots of John Knox, "you or the Church of Rome?" "Ye shall obey neither, madam," was his memorable reply; "ye shall obey God who speaks in His Word, and test all teaching whatsoever by it. For," said he, "the Holy Spirit is never contrarious to Himself." It is the safe course to follow. God never contradicts Himself, and however high the authority which lies behind any teaching, of scholarship, of Church, of personality, it should be tested by the Scriptures. The Berean people to whom Paul preached are commended because they did not accept his *ipse dixit*. After listening to him they went home and searched the Scriptures to see whether these things were so, and there is no better way. You may say, therefore, that all modern preaching that is inspired of God will be good tidings—the good message. Only do not let us misunderstand the term. When you speak of the gospel message, do realize that you are dealing with a very comprehensive term. All the sayings of Jesus are a part of the good news, *and they are not all tender and soothing*. What has been called the wooing note is not invariably found in

them. Indeed, there is nothing more impressive to me in the story of the gospel than the varying moods of Christ. The sunshine is there, but so also is the fierce storm of thunder and lightning and hail, of fiery indignation and fierce rebuke. I read what He says to the weary and penitent, the burdened and troubled, the sincere and earnest, and I am in the glory of a spring day. I feel the caress of the Divine love. But I read what He says and does to the traffickers in the temple, and I go on to read His words to the hypocrite and the liar—to those who set traps for others, and those who oppress, and those who sit still and do nothing —and I am awe-struck.

I suppose you must take these words as a part of the good message: "It were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck and that he were sunk in the depth of the sea"; and these, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how shall ye escape the damnation of hell?"

The good message, therefore, may not be a pleasant message for everybody. There are some people to whom God must say, "I have no pleasure in you." A man has not of necessity preached the good message because he has talked amiably for half an hour and left people unmoved to anything but self-satisfaction. That may be a bad message and a false message, and the speaker may be no true friend to the hearers. Maybe he ought to have warned and sternly condemned. An integral part of the good news—much neglected—is stern warning against sin—against lying and deceit—however clever, against pretence and hypocrisy, against selfishness and oppression and greed; and a faithful pointing out that judgment shall certainly overtake the evildoer.

Here is a part of the good message : " The mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped." " He shall break in pieces the oppressor " : tyranny and wrong shall be defeated, " righteousness shall cover the earth." Therein lies the hope and the comfort of many a faithful soul. A blight would be over everything, and life would be intolerable, if somehow and somewhere the evildoer would not meet his reward. The universal instinct which God has implanted in the soul demands it. That may be bad news for the wrongdoer, for the liar and the oppressor, but good news for the people whom they deceive and oppress and defraud. Bad for the people who hold the keys of the prison, but good for the captives, and good for the world generally ; surely good that righteousness should triumph and wrong be defeated ; good ultimately for the wrongdoer that he should be forced to cease his wrongdoing, for it is far better for him to suffer than that he should be allowed to continue in his evil way ; far better that I should be defeated and put to shame in a wrong course than that I should succeed in it. A part of the joyful news of the world to the Psalmist was that God was the Judge of men. " Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad ; let the sea roar and the fulness thereof ; let the field exult, let the trees sing for joy before the Lord, for He cometh to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness and the people with equity."

My dear brethren, I confess to you that *I would have no gospel to preach if God were not righteous*, and if Eternal Justice were not on the throne—justice that takes into account temperament and temptation, hindrance and defect and all circumstances.

You may say what you will about the kindness and the love of God, and you must declare it if you speak the truth, but if the Moral Ruler of the universe could be other than just and righteous to one of His creatures, rebel or friend, then the foundation would be rottenness, and there would be nothing upon which all men could reverently and safely rest. Surely this is an integral part of the great message of the Old and the New Testament, the consistent testimony of all Bible writers. God is inflexibly just and righteous. "A God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He." It is the message of Moses, and it is the message of Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth . . . for therein is the *righteousness* of God revealed," and no man has preached the gospel who has not declared the righteousness of God.

But no man has struck the deepest note in God's speech to man, or in the message of the gospel, unless he has seen and declared that this just and holy God, abhorring and condemning evil, loves men.

Every stern word of our Lord, every word that like fire searches the soul of man, comes from a heart of love and from a passionate desire to save men from present sin and from the evil to come. His bitter tears over Jerusalem are witness to His love for the men whom He is compelled to condemn.

We often condemn a man in our disappointment and anger, and give him up. Our Lord condemns men and clings to them, appealing again and yet again. He never excuses or condones sin. He condemns it, and forgives it, and delivers men from

it. Over the foulest man He stoops in uttermost compassion. And the good news that always accompanies the condemnation is this: There is a way out of every transgression. Men can escape from the fascination, the stain, the habit, the guilt of their sin. There is remission of sins. The blood of Christ procures and proclaims it. Whatever else the cross of Calvary may be, it is supremely the revelation of the love of God. There God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. There the Holy Christ takes into His own heart the sin of guilty man and does away with it. "God commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." That was the message which the apostles proclaimed, which men believed, and believing were saved. It is the word of the Lord which abideth for ever. It will be told with wonder through the rolling ages of Eternity. Its freshness at this moment lies here: that men still sin and suffer, that God still loves, that Jesus Christ has still power on earth to forgive and to deliver, to redeem human character from all marring defect and to perfect it in purity and truth and all noble goodness.

And this eternal truth still wants messengers who, having proved it, will proclaim it. There is a great and immediate future for experimental preaching and teaching, not theoretical, speculative—men are sick of that—but for men who can say officially or unofficially: "That which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the word of life, that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you that ye also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with

His Son Jesus Christ." I wonder who is able and willing to say that! Believe that it is of some use to say it. "The greatest service that a man can render to his fellow-men is to see something great and beautiful and then go and show it to others," says John Ruskin. Here is the greatest thing of all. If you have seen and felt it, may God give you courage and power to show it.

> "I say to thee do thou repeat,
> To the first man that thou shalt meet
> In lane, highway, or open street,
> That he and we and all men move
> Under a canopy of love
> As broad as the blue heavens above."

This is the witness which He who has saved us would have us bear.

II

HOW ISAIAH BECAME A PROPHET

"In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord; . . . also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I; send me. And He said, Go."—ISAIAH vi. 1, 8, 9.

THE first thing to settle in our minds is that we are reading here the record of an actual experience. Nobody doubts the historicity of Isaiah. Nobody suggests that he was a mythical person. He was a man of flesh and blood, who lived in old Jerusalem, who married and had children born to him, and who exercised a remarkable ministry there. His writings will live for ever, not merely by virtue of their truth, but by their exceeding beauty. Isaiah is one of the great stylists of the Old Testament, and partly for that reason he is more read than any other Old Testament prophet. He is looking back from this chapter—no one quite knows how long—to the fount and origin of his ministry. It was a marvellous memory, and his soul thrills as he recalls it through the intervening and troubled years: "I saw the Lord; also I heard the voice of the Lord." Nothing more wonderful could ever happen to any man; and he is absolutely sure of it. It was always a part of his vivid working con-

sciousness. He remembers the date. It is indeed imprinted indelibly on his memory. It was the year that King Uzziah died—the famous king whose long and memorable reign had brought back the glory of Judah. That is not quite the same thing as if an Englishman should say that some memorable experience befell him in the year that Queen Victoria died. For there was something tragically unusual about the taking off of Uzziah, and something that perhaps gives point to a good deal of Isaiah's vision.

Here is what we read about him in 2 Chronicles: "His name spread far abroad, for he was marvellously helped till he was strong. And when he was strong" (alas for the common frailty of human nature!) "his heart was lifted up to his destruction, and he trespassed against the Lord his God." He went into the temple to burn incense, usurping the office of the priest, and there in the temple beside the altar of incense the brand of God's displeasure was stamped upon his forehead in the sight of all the people. And he did not need the fourscore valiant priests to eject him from the sanctuary; he himself hasted to go out, for the Lord had smitten him with the white spot of leprosy, "and he dwelt in a lazar-house to the day of his death."

And it was in the year that King Uzziah died, when the people, who had shared the presumption and vanity of their king, would recall the whole circumstance which shocked and startled the nation; it was in the year when his life so pathetically closed that Isaiah saw the Lord. The vision and the voice were as real as the death of the King. It was the *annus mirabilis* in Isaiah's life, and he went back to it with awed heart as a

man may go back to the day of his conversion or of his call to the Christian ministry, to gather assurance and strength for present duty.

And I make haste to say, my brethren, that if that ever happened it may happen again and yet again. I mean if a man ever saw God and felt Him near, and heard His voice, and responded, and became vividly conscious of eternal facts, there is no reason why the experience should not be repeated. Why may it not happen to-day, and here and now?

Let me point out to you that what we have here in the first part of it, is the unveiling and perception of a fact, which would still have been a fact even if Isaiah had not perceived it. Surely a great deal depends on our capacity and our willingness to see. We are surrounded by facts every day in sunrise and sunset, in the sea and the land, in the happenings of human history —facts and revelations, to many of which we are blind. The thinkings of men, the blindness of men make no difference to the facts, they only make the difference to themselves. "*I think*," said Mary Queen of Scots to John Knox, "that the Church of Rome is the true Kirk of God, and there I will worship." "Your *thought*, madam," replied he, "can never make that Roman harlot the immaculate spouse of Jesus Christ." You have there two people thinking exactly contrarily respecting a certain institution, and it may be said with truth that the thought of neither of them makes the slightest difference to the real facts.

All the indifference and atheism in the world make no difference to the fact of God. There are still men who know the fact and live under the power of it.

All your plausible excuses and explanations of sin, the most elaborately spun theories that emanate from the brain of man, cannot alter the destructive and damning fact of it, or remove God's condemnation from it. And our business in the world, the business of the Christian Church and the Christian ministry, is to search for facts, to welcome them and declare them, be they popular or unpopular. And what came to Isaiah that memorable day as he entered into the temple with perplexed and burdened heart was the revelation and the perception of a fact. Apparently no other person in Jerusalem had the vision. The greatest things that we see in life, the epoch-making things, are generally seen in solitude. Probably no one but Isaiah was fit to see the facts. Of all the miserable exiles working in the quarries of Patmos, St. John alone had the vision of the living and reigning Christ and of His ultimate victory over all the forces of evil. Let us see what the facts were and what they mean for us.

I

The first and great fact is that God lives. If that be once a fact it is an eternal fact, and it is the supreme and vital fact. Even if we are not aware of it, even if for a whole generation the majority of mankind are so materialised as to become oblivious of the fact, it is still the predominant fact of human life. And many of us are unconscious of it. We assume God, we do not feel Him. We do not consciously stand, and live, and work in His presence. As long ago as the commencement of my ministry a great English

preacher and theologian declared that we English people had invented a religion without God. He declared that congregations met together to hear a preacher, to sing hymns, and repeat confessions and creeds, and unite in prayers, and that they separated without any realization of the presence of God. It was a startling statement, and exception was taken to it at the time by many religious people, but Dr. Dale adhered to it in the main. Whether it be more true now than at that time I cannot say. I only know that a preacher may stand up in the midst of a visionless congregation and that he may be visionless himself; without any consciousness of the dignity of the occasion and the awful greatness of the possibilities when men meet together for worship. And I venture to affirm that there is nothing that the Church of Christ needs so much to-day as a recovery of the vivid consciousness of God, and I suggest that the Church everywhere should cry and pray for it. What a difference it would make to the whole tone and temper of our worship, if we came together on a Sunday not to hear a sermon or an anthem, or to sing hymns, or merely to meet with pleasant people, but to see God, to feel Him near, to open our hearts to His presence, to feel and commune with the Spirit of the Highest! Suppose that be possible, with all its enriching and fructifying effect, and suppose we are missing it! I put it before you as a great possibility to be sedulously striven after, and which we must secure if preaching and prayers are not to become a mere human performance and the exercises of the Church are not to degenerate into mechanical and empty routine.

For see what accompanies or follows upon the

consciousness of God in the hearts of men. I suggest that it is invariably—

1. The fact of His august sovereignty, of His throne, His rule and authority unmoved by all the aberrations of men. When the fact of the divine government had weakened in Israel and men might have thought that the Throne was empty, this vision came, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up." I fancy it was designed to meet the doubt in Isaiah's mind, to bring to him the consciousness that dwelt in the breast of psalmist and prophet expressed in words such as these, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever," and, "I am a great king, saith the Lord of Hosts."

I have an idea that this is characteristic of every Theophany which has come to men, and it is what we need to-day. Our fathers tended to lose sight of the Fatherhood of God in His Sovereignty: our foolish tendency is to dissociate Sovereignty from Fatherhood or to forget that authority is an integral part of it. The first vision of the glorified Christ which the man had who had known Him most intimately in the days of His flesh was one of such amazing and blinding glory that he fell at His feet as one dead.

The predominant conception of our Master which St. Paul had was that of one in whose name every knee should bow and before whose Judgment Seat every man should be made manifest. And if you go beyond these to the consciousness of our Lord Himself, you find Him continually assuming the regal and imperial position. The son of man is to sit upon the throne of His glory. "Art thou a king, then?" asked Pilate, and the answer, quietly given, is, "I am," "Thou sayest."

There are no words in human speech which can match these in their august claim. "All authority hath been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

You know what had happened in Isaiah's day. The people had lost all sense of the Divine Majesty. They were behaving—as Dr. G. A. Smith says—"as though there were a fool on the throne of the universe," as though the Most High could be arranged with, could be bribed or blinded by the smoke of their burnt offerings. And over against their little and narrow conception of God was set this conception which is true.

Am I right in saying that the trend of the modern temper is towards presumption and towards this same conception of a God who is weak and soft, and indulgent and unmoral, and who holds the sceptre of the universe with an uncertain hand?

Have we not, some of us, a conception of the Lord Jesus which is without strength and dignity, the "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" of Wesley's hymns? And it is not true, because it is not adequate. He is gentle, thank God, as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, but He is also, thank God, majestic and terrible. His eyes are ablaze with the fire of indignation, and out of His mouth there goes a sharp two-edged sword. To the New Testament seer He is not merely the gentle and condescending Christ who stands at the door and knocks: He is this also to him, "I saw the heavens opened, and behold a white horse, and He that sat thereon was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. And His eyes are a flame of fire and on His head are many crowns and He is arrayed in a vesture dipped in blood. And He hath on His vesture and

on His thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords."

2. I believe that a recovery of the consciousness of God in the Church would bring back *reverence.* It is lacking in human life—reverence for authority in the home, in society, in the State; and the Church is the last home of reverence, the sense of awe which refines life and redeems it from vulgarity, reverence in worship, reverence in Christian work. With what reverence I would preach and you would hear and we all would worship; how far from our mind would be all petty personal ambition, of self-aggrandizement, of the sermon as a mere performance; with what humble and grateful reverence you would pray and sing and teach and give; indeed, with what reverence we would live, regarding our duty as God's appointment, our bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost, and human life everywhere as His creation and His purchased possession. How strong and brave we would be to resist evil, how eager in pleading the cause of God if there came upon us the consciousness that filled the mind of Isaiah; God is Sovereign. God is Holy. It was in this consciousness that he went forth to smite the frivolity, the pretence, the injustice, the irreverence of his time and land. There glowed in his mind all the time this burning thought, driving out of it all fear of man, "Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts."

3. With the consciousness of God there invariably comes also the sense of personal defect. Immediately the vision of God dawns upon Isaiah there breaks from his lips the confession, "Woe is me, for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips," etc. That cry is significant when you remem-

ber that it is in part the old cry of the leper. Here is the Levitical direction, "The leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, 'Unclean, unclean.'"

Remember that Uzziah had been smitten with leprosy for the sin of presumption, and that the people had shared his sin, and you may trace the significance. I do not pursue the idea further, save to say that in my judgment the modern lack of the sense of sin is largely due to our lack of the sense of God, and that when God stands clear on the horizon of any man's life, self-sufficiency and complacency will vanish, and he will say, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, now mine eye seeth Thee, wherefore I abhor myself and repent in sackcloth and ashes."

And the only other word that one needs to say about this part of the vision is that no sooner is uncleanness confessed than its stain is removed. It does not require a long series of pilgrimages and penances, much less ages of the cleansing fires of purgatory, to fit a man to abide in the glory of God's presence. One touch of the holy fire from God's altar will suffice, and thereby a man learns that the Divine majesty and the Divine mercy are both one.

II

The second main thought that I venture to bring before you is the personal appeal to Isaiah that comes out of the vision and his response thereto. "I heard the voice of the Lord." It is obvious from the first that Isaiah is conscious of being, not an awed spectator of the scene, but an

active participant. He is in the picture, in the house whose door-posts are moved at the voice of Jehovah. He is among the company that surround the throne. And he becomes conscious—mark you, as Moses did, and David and Jeremiah and Paul and Carey—of what I may call the Divine need—I might almost say of the perplexity of God. The Eternal King whose glory fills the heavens and the earth will not only deign to use men, but has actually need of men. It may be presumed that Isaiah discerned that the very thing that was troubling his own heart was the thing that troubled the heart of God—viz., the apostasy and sin of Jerusalem, and that God would get at it not by some supernatural agency, some seraph appearing among men in blazing glory, but by a human voice. It may further be assumed that Isaiah knew what was involved in the appeal. It meant that somebody was wanted to stand in the mid-current of his times to be a solitary figure to protest against the social sins of Jerusalem, the oppression of the poor. If you want to know the kind of ministry needed, read the first chapters of the book. Read his denunciation of heartless and hypocritical worship. Read Isaiah on women in chapter iii., overdressed, self-indulgent; read how he scorns and scathes their ways. Read what he says to land-grabbing and drinking men, and then understand that the appeal of God was for a man who would dare to stand up against all that, to be derided and mocked, despised and rejected, to be accused of narrowness and lack of patriotism, and much more, and to bear that heaviest cross of all, to see people growing worse and worse, harder and blinder, under his ministry. That was the call,

and Isaiah, knowing something of what it involved, said instantly, "Here am I, send me."

I believe that if men became conscious of the reality of God they would feel the need, the solicitude of God, and indeed through human need they would come to detect the call and the claim of the Most High.

Men are sometimes disposed to think that all the sadness and suffering, the ignorance and shame of the world mean that there is no throne of God. The real truth is that He who sits on the throne is calling and waiting for men who will offer themselves. To people who are wasting their time, spending their money on their own pleasures, amusing themselves while humanity struggles and moans in its need, there might come, if only they had ears to hear, the cry of the living God, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Who will take the path of service and of sacrifice? Who will watch with Christ and suffer with Him?

And it is not merely a question of going. It is a question of being sent. Isaiah does not go away from the vision saying, "I must do something." He goes from it the commissioned and accredited and inspired agent and messenger of the Most High, with all the authority of God behind him and his message.

It is not a question, therefore, of giving ourselves to the work of the ministry or of Sunday-school teaching. It is rather a question of giving ourselves to God for whatever work He will send us to, and attempting it at His bidding; and one feels quite sure that God's voice is reaching some of us, that there is some bit of work that He would have us do, some sin to rebuke, some sorrow to comfort, some waste place to

be restored, some wrong to be righted. I do not suppose that such a dramatic vision and call will come to us as came to Isaiah. It is a great comfort to realize that the call of God comes to different men in different ways. Not every prophet of the Old Testament received such an awing Theophany as Isaiah. There was once a simple farmer at work in a field ploughing, and an old man went past him and threw his mantle over his shoulders as he bent over his plough handles. And that was the call of God to Elisha, and his ministry was no less illustrious than that of his mysterious predecessor. So the call of God may come to us in the letter of a friend, in a cry for help, an appeal from a pulpit, or a letter in a newspaper.

It may involve us in sacrifice or serious difficulty. Let us pray for grace to hear and respond. For with the call there will come the assurance that came from the Unseen to Moses and Joshua, and to Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and that came from the lips of the risen Christ to His disciples, and that has been proved to be a profound fact in the path of obedience: "I am with thee. I will not fail thee. I am with you all the days, even unto the end."

III

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE WORD

"The law [or doctrine] of the Lord is perfect [= sound], restoring the soul.
The testimony of the Lord is sure [= trustworthy], making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right [= straightforward], rejoicing the heart.
The commandment of the Lord is pure [= clear-shining], enlightening the eyes."—PSALM xix. 7, 8.

THESE verses are really the centre of this beautiful poem. There is a very abrupt transition in the psalm in verses 6 and 7, so abrupt that it has been suggested that there are two authors of the psalm—one of whom extols nature and the other the law of God. It is not at all necessary. It is quite a reasonable conception which makes the first six verses lead up to the rest of the poem. The fact is you have not two parts in this psalm, but three; three strophes. The first to verse 6 is a rapturous contemplation of the heavens—as a manifestation of God's glory and power. The second, verses 7–10, a still keener appreciation of the revelation contained in the law or written word. While the third section is a prayer to the God who spread the heavens and gave the law, and who is the living God immedi-

ately accessible to man, revealing Himself not through the medium of the Creation, nor of the written word, but immediately to the soul of the praying man.

It seems, therefore, that you have a natural progression in the psalm: you have first the outer court of nature, then the inner court, and then the holiest of all, where the man who has been awed by the physical universe, and instructed and inspired by the word, comes face to face with the Creator in direct prayer and communion. I beg to be allowed to regard the psalm as an experience of some saint in ancient times, an experience and a testimony which he was inspired to put on record for the guidance of other souls. It is a psalm which I was privileged to commit to memory as a child, and which I have never forgotten.

I

I ask you to look for a moment at the introductory strophe that we may see its connection with this. It is obviously the work of a man who has often been alone in the great solitudes of the East, with the vastnesses and immensities of the physical universe. Out under the silent skies by night watching the stars, making them his companions, awed by their mystery, thinking of the great God who created and ruled them—alone—pondering and thinking until the whole vast silence became vocal with the message of God. We modern people, who live in great cities, have lost a great deal through the lack of solitude. We are losing the faculty for it. We could scarcely bear to be alone at night under the stars or by the sea. It would be too weird for our nerves. We

rarely look above the electric light—we have rarely watched the dawn alone. Here is a man who had, who had been

"Alone with God amid the mystic shadows,
The solemn hush of nature newly born, in breathless adoration."

He did not know what the stars were, nor what was the distance to the sun, but he knew what some astronomers do not—that God made them. The heavens were the handiwork of God. He saw the sun come forth from his tent in the morning, apparently rejoicing, and without weariness pursuing his course till he retired to his tent in the glory of the evening; and while he never penetrated to the *natural* fact of the earth moving round the sun, he saw the *spiritual* secret that God had made the great luminary and set his tent in the heavens.

My friends, it would prove a great blessing to our modern life; it would redeem it from its often pitiable littleness, its vulgarity, its sordidness, its pathetic conceit, its shallow self-satisfaction in the midst of profound ignorance, its irreverence and silliness, if we could obey the word of the prophet, "Lift up your eyes on high and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number, He calleth them all by names by the greatness of His might." *There* is a neglected book that men might read and a neglected influence which might bless their lives.

II

The transition seems to be natural and simple from one revelation of God to another and deeper.

The argument may be *a priori*, viz., if there be a revelation of God in the firmament there is still more a revelation of Him in the word which He inspired men to speak or write or teach. You may be delivered from atheism by the starry heavens. A man may be convinced as he contemplates their impressive and wondrous order of the absurdity of thinking that they all came into existence, and continue in existence, without a creating hand and intelligence; but the question still remains, Who and what *is* this power that is hidden behind the phenomena? You can never tell what God is by the stars, and there are times when even the sun is cruel. Either he hides behind the clouds day by day, or in the East for months together his sword-like beams smite men, and wither up the grass and dry up the springs of water, and there is nothing more pitiless. Neither the sun nor the stars can heal a broken heart, and there are times when nature is a profound enigma.

"The voice of God's creation found me
Perplexed 'midst hope and fear;
For though His sunshine streamed around me,
His storms at times drew near;
And I said—
'O that I knew where He abideth,
For doubts beset our lot,
And lo! His glorious face He hideth,
And men perceive it not.'

"It was the voice of Revelation
That met my utmost need;
The wondrous message of salvation
Was joy and peace indeed;

And I said—

'O how I love the sacred pages
From which such tidings flow,
As monarchs, patriarchs, poets, sages,
Have longed in vain to know!'"

May I say that the supreme value of the Word as men knew it in the Psalmist's time was not merely that it revealed what man ought to do, but rather that it revealed what God was. The light shone not only on the path of man's duty, but on the character of God. In its pages He stood revealed. And in verse 9, as I take it, you get some great outshining characteristics of the God of the Hebrews, the one true and living God, something the starry heavens could never tell you. For "*the fear of the Lord*," verse 9, read, "*the religion of the Lord*," and then observe, "*it is* '*clean.*'" For "judgments" read "ordinances," and put on to that "*true and righteous*," or truth and righteousness, and then realize that as was His religion, and as were His ordinances, so was He; and that was a new element in the religions of the world when it appeared. The gods of the nations were not clean and they were not true. They were lustful and capricious and cruel. Then we know that to cleanness and righteousness was always to be added *mercy, compassion, a tender care for men*; and when you think of that, and of how men longed and burned to know the truth about God, you may see the preciousness to earnest hearts of the message that declared what God was. And that message was *authentic*. It was as truly the handiwork of God as the firmament. If the Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters, He moved much more on the souls and minds of men. "The *word*" was not a human invention.

It may have been in part a human discovery, but it was the discovery of a fact, the fact of the nature of God.

Take the four terms in verses 7–8: *law*, *testimony*, *precept*, *commandment*. They are all terms used in Psalm cxix. for the word—and they are not taken here by themselves; they are invested with the august authority of Divine creation and inspiration. They are not guesses and speculations—they are facts. "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." That does not mean that they were merely passive channels through which the word flowed. They groped and questioned, and God flashed His light upon them, Here, for example, is a great word for men to rest in—a Divine revelation, a human discovery, "Thou Lord art good, and ready to forgive and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee." Would not that be like the dawn of a new day to men oppressed with the grave problems of existence, and bound by the gross and cruel superstitions of their time? It was surely a part of the good news of God. Do you wonder that a man could write after that, "The law of Jehovah is perfect [meaning sufficient], *restoring* the soul"? It does not mean *converting* exclusively in the New Testament sense. It is the same word as that in the 23rd Psalm, "He restoreth my soul.' It may mean restoring—turning back—from transgression and wandering; but it may also mean restoring from doubt, or from fainting, or from depression or despair. There can be no doubt that the Bible has done that. "The implanted word," says James, "is able to save your souls."

I earnestly recommend the Bible as a cure for depression. Get at its great declarations of the

character of God. Get at its exceeding great and precious promises. Pray God to make them living words to you. To trust and tranquillity, to calmness and courage, to hope and confidence men's souls have been restored by the reading of the Scriptures. I attribute a considerable amount of modern depression as well as the foolish wanderings of men to the modern neglect of the Bible.

The word *testimony* is a very expressive word as applied to the Scriptures. It may mean so many things. "The testimony of the Lord" may mean the will of the Lord made known to men. I venture to emphasize one shade of its meaning which I believe to be quite legitimate. A great part of the Old Testament is the record of God's dealings with men, men's experience with God, their evidence and testimony of what they have found God to be.

Here is an example: "I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings," etc. That is a part of the testimony of the Lord. There is almost infinite comfort in it, and there is sure guidance.

Here are others: "I sought the Lord and He heard me and delivered me from all my fears." "They looked unto Him and were lightened. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." That is the testimony of the Lord, and it is sure. You can build on it. What happened once may happen again. If men could say at any time, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us," they may say it now. You may as safely build on these as on any law in

science. Let a man guide his course by this experience; he may be unversed in the ways of the world, untaught in its schools; a simple soul, but he has found the true wisdom. He will have the true and large conception of life.

I pass on to notice the two remaining terms descriptive of the Bible as the Psalmist knew it. "Statutes or precepts," and "commandments." They are kindred terms. They mean that the Bible does not give promises and experiences merely. It gives commandments—it is a law, and by these terms I gather two things:—

(1) *They are right*, and (2) they are *clear, far shining*. A lamp and a light. The Bible cries, "This is the way, walk ye in it." And mark you, the cry is based not on some arbitrary will or caprice, but on right: "The precepts of the Lord are *right*." God commands nothing that is not right. You may complain that the commands are difficult. The difficulty may lie in yourself or in your circumstances, but they are right, and you are here to find what is right and to do it. The standard of right is the Bible. Perplexed about the right, turn to its pages. Find the law of God; shape your life by it. And these two things come out of obedience: *joy* and *enlightenment*. A glad heart and a clear vision. There is not so much of either in this world that we can afford to ignore or neglect the way to them. A great part of our life consists in disillusionment, and it is partly at least because we will not shape our course by this book.

III

Finally, this Psalmist comes from the heavens and the Bible to the author of both—realizing as I

think that the purpose of both revelations is to lead the soul to Him. It is not in the Bible nor the heavens that he is going to find strength and help, but in God. So he prays to be cleansed from secret sins—to be kept back from presumptuous sins, and so to be guided and controlled that words and thoughts may be acceptable in the sight of God.

You see what you have here, therefore—a man who finds light enough in his little Bible and in nature to lead him to God, and who realizes that God can speak directly to his soul.

And my irresistible thought is this. If he found that in his small Bible, what ought we to find in our greater and infinitely richer book? You may know a great deal more of the stars than he did. You may know far more about God than he did. All the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ has broken on the world since his day. All the wealth of Christian experience has been added to the testimony of the Lord.

I think it possible that he loved his little Bible more than we love our fuller book. It was more precious than gold and sweeter than honey to him. That is a tremendous thing to say, but you may be sure he felt it. It is his testimony to the precious treasure. You see, the book had few competitors, as life was slower and simpler. Books were almost non-existent for the old Hebrew. Amusements were few, men had time to meditate, and they did, some of them, day and night, on the wonderful law of Jehovah. We can never get back the quiet of those far-off days. More and more crowded becomes our life, more and more exacting the strain, greater the feverishness and the excitements. But we have our Book. Great and wonderful. A sure word

of prophecy to which we may continually resort as to a light shining in a dark place. It would prove a blessing beyond dispute if we would continually resort to it, especially to the Scriptures of the New Testament—if we would acquaint ourselves with their contents and let no day pass without getting some part of them into heart and mind. I beg you to do it and let them lead you to God. Know that He is at least as near to you as to the men of old time, that all they found in Him you may find also.

IV

WHERE IS THE USE OF THE SCRIPTURES?

"But these [things] are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name."—JOHN xx. 31.

IN the first part of the text the writer refers to the Fourth Gospel only, to his own work. He declares that he has had an aim and object in writing, and what that object is. He has just declared that he has written only a small part of what might have been written, and in the epilogue or appendix which follows he declares in bold hyperbole that if the whole were written the world would not contain the books. He has not, therefore, been attempting to write a life of Christ. He seems to say that would be an impossible task. Out of the vast material that lay to his hand he has made selections, his idea being to get his book read. And his selections are made with a definite purpose. He has not only been inspired to write, but he has been inspired with the purpose. You feel as you read what he says here and in the appendix about the vastness of the materials, what a crowded ministry was the brief ministry of our Lord! How every hour must have been utilized;

how greedy He must have been of the swiftly passing and diminishing days.

And, further, you feel how much there must have been of the words of Christ and His Apostles outside the New Testament; seeds that dropped into the hearts of men and that perhaps were sown in some of the pagan faiths of the world. Just as there was very much work of God's Spirit outside the Jewish nation in the old time.

A further word that it occurs to me to say just here is this: that what this writer declares to be his purpose in writing may with equal truth be said to be the purpose of the whole Bible. It is a book with a purpose, and that purpose is not to teach science or history, but to lead men to faith in God and through faith to life.

And this still further word, that every minister and every Sunday-school teacher in sermon or lesson should have an aim and an object. In nature talk, or history lesson, or character study, or sermon there should be an aim, and that not to fill up time, nor merely to give information, nor even to interest people, not to be witty or eloquent or striking or dramatic. You had better be these, of course, than dull and dead, but they are all incidental. Here is the purpose of preaching and teaching, and indeed of the whole institution of Church and Sunday-school; here is the business to be working at: that men may believe, and that believing they may have life. True, we may fail of our purpose, we may suffer disappointment with it, but we are to cherish and pursue it stedfastly and ardently to the end.

The question to be asked of every sermon and Sunday-school lesson—of the whole arrangement

of the Church and of Christian life as we are living it—is, Is it calculated to lead men to believe and to help men to believe in Jesus Christ? That is *the* vital matter, and a matter that one fears we are sometimes tempted to lose sight of, or to relegate to a subordinate place in our scheme of things. Now will you bear with me and co-operate with me as I try to lead you to study the great purpose of this writer? See that he uses great words here, words that are constantly recurring in his gospel, vital words—"*believe*" and "*life*"; and pray that some one may be led to belief and life through the medium of the word spoken. Let us begin at the end of the text and with the ultimate object of the writer with his readers, with the great word, *life*; then let us consider the other great word—*believe* or *believing* —as a way and means to life, and finally a word about the way to believing.

I

Take the great word *Life*, occurring at least thirty times in this Gospel. It is the ultimate object of the writer—whom I believe to have been the Apostle John—that men who read his book may have life. You remember our Lord says the same thing in His allegory of the Good Shepherd (chap. x.), "I am come that they may have life," and again (chap. xii.), "Ye will not come to Me that ye may have life." It follows from such words as these and many others that in the judgment of our Lord, who knew human nature in all its potentiality, many men were not living, that they refused the way of *life*. So Paul saw them. He declared of men who were eating and drinking,

walking and talking, buying and selling, that they were dead.

It follows, therefore, that our Lord and His Apostles had a much larger and higher conception of life for a man than was common, and that men may have something which they think to be life and which in the judgment of Christ, which is the judgment of truth, is no life at all. After all, what is it to live for a *man*? To *live*, mark you, not merely to *exist*, and for a *man*, not a butterfly or an animal. I suppose there are thousands of people in England and in America who, if they had enough to eat and drink and wear and spend, would say they *had enough to live upon*. It is a term we commonly use for people who have a certain amount of money. Yet even down all that low level the conception varies, and what would be enough for some men to live and thrive upon would be called starvation for other men. What would be dazzling wealth for some men would be accounted beggary by others. Goldsmith's parson was

> "Passing rich on forty pounds a year";

while I heard the other day of a person who complained that he was so poor that he could not afford to keep more than one motor-car.

It takes very little to keep the body alive, to keep the heart beating and even healthily beating. There are many people who would say of such a bare life as our Lord lived and His Apostles, "That is not living at all." We are demanding more and more of outward good—we must have comforts and conveniences, amusements, books, newspapers, and excitements. We are continually demanding that life shall be made more spacious and luxurious.

We will have music and art and more points of contact with that which ministers to pleasure and joy. What are we saying when we talk like that? Why, that man is more than body. He is mind as well. He has tastes, as we say, hungers and thirsts that are mental and æsthetic as well as physical.

And even that is not all. Suppose that a man have enough to eat and drink and wear and surround himself with all manner of delights, as objects of art, books, and even motor-cars; he is not living unless he has *love*. The two words *love* and *live* are vitally related; etymologically they spring from the same root, and the man who loves nobody and is not loved is not living. If you could only get him to love a dog he would be a better man, and if you could lead him on from that to love his fellow-creatures the spirit part of him would have begun to wake up; and if you could get him to love God he would be alive. He would have entered into an infinitely larger world.

Man is not body alone, nor body and mind alone. He is soul and spirit, and unless the spiritual part of him is alive he is not really living.

Let me use an illustration. There is an organ, a magnificently constructed instrument, there are three manuals, and there are pedals, every conceivable stop, and a whole multitude of pipes. It happens to be in the possession of a person who can only use one manual and grind out a few tunes in one particular key. As for the pedals and stops, he does not understand their use. It would be an insult to the maker to call his performance "playing," as it would be an insult to the instrument.

Am I not right in thinking of man in God's eternal purpose as a marvellous instrument? What loveliness of perfect deeds and sweet harmony of character he is capable of at his best, let the great saints of history testify. And it was to bring man to his best that Christ came, and to bring men to their best in Him that this Gospel was written.

Now, it is quite possible—nothing is easier—to cherish delusions concerning life. A man may think himself, and be thought by others, to be living because he is making a good deal of money, or because he has a multitude of interests and robust physical health and many pleasures. And while he is saying that, the gospel may say to him, "You are not really living at all; you have not begun to *live*. There is a whole range of faculties lying dormant and being atrophied for want of use. True, you may be quite content. That is the tragic part of it. The man with the organ may be quite happy; he may even think that he can play. He can make a noise and have many hours of amusement by himself at his instrument. Occasionally the sight of unused stops and pedals may disturb his complacency and suggest untouched possibilities. But the best thing that could be done to shatter his self-delusions would be to take him to hear a similar instrument played by a master hand. And that, my friends, is something like what the gospel does. It takes you and me and sets us down before the human life of Christ, and bids us see how marvellous is the music and how amazing the goodness when human life is brought under the unrestricted operation of the Spirit of God.

Do let us realize, beloved friends, that the whole

purpose of God with us is to lead us to life; not to still the music of life, but to expand its range and compass and to sweeten its tone. To expand and not restrict is our Lord's purpose. You will leave some of the old melodies behind because you have learnt nobler strains. A man who, in our Lord's phrase, "enters into life" will continue to do many of the same things. He will eat and drink and play and work, and maybe make money and enjoy art and literature, but there will be a new motive and vision and impulse; a higher interest will quicken and exalt his faculties; a new power will throb in his soul; a loftier and larger consciousness will possess him. He will be less dependent on lower interests because he has that which will abide for ever: treasure which cannot be stolen, a fellowship which can never be broken in time or eternity.

II

Now, how is that life reached? Through what means or medium? Here is the answer of my text: through *belief*. Here, again, is one of the great words of this Gospel occurring more than one hundred times. Its whole burden seems to be, You must *believe*—you must believe on or in Jesus Christ. I quote one passage only: "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life, he that believeth not the Son shall not see life." Are you surprised that this book insists on the intimate relation between belief and life? Really this relation is an unalterable fact. The man who declares that it does not matter what he believes or whether he believes it at all is really talking nonsense. Believing is not accepting blindly whatever is told you, assenting to certain statements

into which you have never inquired and which you have never considered, nor is it having certain opinions. It is far deeper than that. It lies in the realm of conviction rather than opinion. And there is a most intimate relation between belief and life. They are often seed and plant, or tree and fruit. I take the whole faculty of believing. It is a faculty in which some men are far richer by temperament than others. There are people who seem to have been born sceptics. They are one great mark of interrogation, and they have much to contend with. But find a man who has cultivated the suspicious side of his nature, who trusts nobody and believes in nobody. Do you think he is living? If joy is a part of life and correspondence with environment is a part of life, do you think he has any? And don't you know that if all men were like him life would be an intolerable burden and society would never hang together? Is it not true that it is the man who believes who does things, and the man who doubts does nothing? But here your faculty of faith is directed to a certain object. I agree that it is not a vital matter whether you believe certain things or not. It may not make much difference whether you believe that the "Memorabilia" of Socrates is the work of Xenophon and whether it represents actual conversations or not. I would even agree that it is not a vital matter whether certain things stated and commonly believed about our Lord are believed by you or not. You may feel that they are unlikely and that you have not sufficient evidence. But it does make a vital difference to life and character whether a man believes on Jesus Christ or not; whether when the great claims are made in His name we accept them or not.

Granted that certain things are true, it makes all the difference in the world whether they are believed or not. If you are told on some competent authority that your child has the making of a great musician or artist in him, or if I am told by some eminent physician that I have the seeds of some mortal disease in my system, and that he can cure me if I will submit to his treatment, it may make all the difference between life and death whether I believe him or not. And there is plenty of evidence to show that where men believe in Christ in the New Testament sense, as the Apostles, including Paul, and the people of Ephesus who burnt their books, and myriads of others believed, it completely revolutionizes life. They become new and different creatures. For it really means committing the life to Him in trust and obedience, living to do His will instead of living to please ourselves; and the evidence is that where that is done, —really done and not professed to be done—new life begins, rest and peace, power and joy come to the soul. Men enter into new relationships and new fellowships, and a power unknown before flows into life.

III

The final question is the relation of the gospel to believing. "These things are written that ye may believe." It means that men cannot be expected to believe without knowing something. They are not expected to believe that which they have never heard, and about which they have never thought or inquired or been informed.

"Faith cometh by hearing," says Paul, and while no one knew better than he that often it did not,

that unbelief came because men rejected what they heard, yet what he meant was that men must at least have a chance of hearing. The purpose of this writer is that Christ shall be so set forth in his pages that men should see Him in all the wonder of His being and the glory of His person and His work, that they should be won to belief—that is, to the committal of life to His saving authority and grace.

Of course, if the writing of the Gospel is to have this effect it must be read. It was written with that object; and far beyond the dream of the writer the printing press has made it possible that it shall be read by millions of people. The Gospel according to John can be bought for a penny. Along with the three synoptic Gospels it can be carried in a dainty little volume in the waistcoat pocket. There is very little more of it in number of words than in your morning newspaper. It contains a message that can bring life, and which has brought eternal life to many a soul. It is quite possible at this time of day that some of you have never read it. I beg you to turn your attention to it. Buy one of those little pocket Testaments and read a little every day. Make it the daily companion of your holidays. If it be true, it is the most amazing document and the most life-giving that could come into your hands. It contains the heart of the gospel. "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, etc.," is in the Fourth Gospel. It declares the Deity and Messiahship of Christ. It declares that the world was made by Him; that there is a home of peace beyond the storms of this life. It declares that Jesus Christ is the Vine and His people the branches, and that they are not His slaves but His friends, who will be with Him in

His glory for ever. Have you read it? Will you read it? And will you put its statements to the proof? Will you believe in and commit your life to the Divine lover of men, in fellowship with whom is everlasting life?

V

THE ETERNAL PRESENCE

"Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."—MATTHEW xxviii. 20.

THERE is no greater word than this in all the annals of human speech. It is so great that few Christian people grasp its reality. It is almost too great and wonderful to be believed.

You know that a certain school of criticism has detached the last verses of Matthew's Gospel from the sayings of our Lord. They point out the extreme improbability of His ever having spoken them. We are told that they must have been put into His lips by admirers and disciples of a later day, when the doctrine of the Trinity was more fully developed than in the time of our Lord. Well, at least even that criticism shows what Christians at a very early date thought of Jesus; and at least also we must acknowledge that He taught His disciples to believe in the Father and Himself as being one with the Father, and to expect the Holy Spirit.

It is quite true that nothing like these words is found on the lips of other great religious teachers. Ever since my student days, when I struggled to translate the "Memorabilia" of

Socrates by Xenophon, I have regarded the death of that great philosopher and teacher as one of the greatest pictures in history. Socrates has drunk the cup of hemlock by the order of his judges. He has a few admiring friends and disciples with him. Bravely and almost playfully he faces death, saying that when the poison which is paralyzing his limbs touches his heart he shall have solved the great mystery of death. But he does not say, "I shall be with you." Perhaps his chief trouble is that he will see his disciples no more. As for death, he has said to his judges, "And now we go our several ways, you to live and I to die, but which has the better fate only the gods know." He declares that death may be an evil or it may be a good. It may bring great loss or great gain. It may be tantamount to a dreamless sleep. It may introduce him to the old heroes of the Trojan war. He may be able in the unseen world, of whose existence he is perfectly assured, to carry on his old business of a cross-examining missionary. No one knows—only the gods can tell.

But if we are to trust the New Testament record as a record of facts, and the time has come when we must make up our minds on the subject, we have one speaking here who knows what death is. He has passed through it. He is not only speaking as no other has ever spoken; He is standing where man has never stood — with death behind Him and not in front. Every one of us has death in front of him. "The shadow feared of man," as Tennyson calls it, "cloaked from head to foot and holding the keys of all the creeds." And no one knows how near or how far it is. But here is one who has passed the shadow, who

has come through the darkness into the light that will never pass. He has His resurrection body independent of spatial limitations. "Christ having risen from the dead dieth no more"; and here is the imperial word—as reported at least—

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth," in the unseen and the seen, "and lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the end of the world."

How can we know whether our Lord said these words, whether they are true? I venture to say first, that in their imperial claim they are akin to many other reported sayings of Jesus. It may be said that just as wherever you test the sea it is salt, so wherever you test the sayings of Christ you come upon this august note. He is always speaking as man never spoke. Caring nothing for titles and everything for truth, He is always putting Himself in a category apart, and claiming what would be absurd in other lips. Take this Gospel of Matthew alone, and you find that He claims the power to quiet the heaving, moaning sea of human restlessness, even as He is reported to have stilled the waters of the Lake of Galilee. In the same chapter He claims the exclusive power to reveal God the Father fully to men. In one parable He claims to be the Son while all others are servants; and most of all He declares that He is the judge of all mankind, and on their relation of obedience or disobedience to Him men will be sheltered as in a home of the soul, or wrecked and ruined. Always in a tone of exclusive authority He speaks to men, and this last great claim is but consistent with the whole tenor of His teaching concerning Himself.

But I would venture to point out, in the second

place, that the words of my text have been proved to be true by the Christian experience of nineteen centuries. Whether Christ said them or not, therefore, they are so far proved to be true. And it is rather late in the day to start a doubt about their veracity. Literary criticism avails little against Christian experience.

I go back to the first Christian century. I think of a man of regal intellect, one of the world's few really great men, who has left his mark indelibly on the course of human history. A man who, moreover, hated the very name of Jesus, and struck against His cause with all the passion of an intense nature, and determined to stamp out the doctrine that he hated. I see his life completely revolutionized. He gives up everything men consider to be worth holding—honour, position, and name. He becomes poor, despised—accepts a life of scorn and suffering and constant peril. He wears out his great nature in selfless service for others; and his explanation, adhered to strictly to the day of his death, of that vast change that swept over his life, was that he had seen Jesus and heard Him speak. He had never seen Him in the flesh, but he saw Him afterwards. And again and again the holy and familiar voice spoke to him. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." "Fear not, Paul; I am with thee, and no man shall set upon thee to hurt thee," and so on to the last chapter in his life, when he writes, "At my first defence no man stood with me, all men forsook me." And then as naturally as if he had said, "Notwithstanding, Luke was with me," he says, "Notwithstanding, the Lord (JESUS) stood with me and strengthened me." The living Jesus was as great a reality to that man of massive mind

and keen insight as either Mark or Timothy were.

I come from the first century to the nineteenth, to a man at whose feet I was privileged to sit as a youth, and to whom I owe far more than to any other theologian, I mean Dr. R. W. Dale. His son, Sir Alfred Dale, Vice-Chancellor of Liverpool University, has told us that far on in his ministry Dale was preparing his Easter sermons, when there came to him this consciousness, with all the power of a new revelation or discovery, Jesus Christ is living, and, says his biographer, "Dale walked up and down his study in the greatest excitement, saying over to himself again and again, 'Jesus Christ is alive; He is here.'" And ever after that scarcely a Sunday morning passed in Carr's Lane Meeting-house but there was a hymn to the risen living Christ, until visitors sometimes thought that Dale had mistaken some other Sunday for Easter. There was a man not given to hallucinations; a man, again, of great intellectual power; of complete common sense, of shrewd sagacity; a politician of the highest order, the Chairman of the Birmingham School Board; a man of sound practical judgment, who had in the background of all his later life the vivid consciousness that the Lord Jesus was living and with His people, and that these words, therefore, are true. And between these two men stretch a multitude which no man can number, some of them people of simple birth and life, unlearned save in the things of the soul, who bear testimony to the same consciousness. Here a signalman on the Midland Railway writing to me and saying, "At my solitary post of duty in the wild and stormy night the presence of Christ is as real to

me as the presence of my wife and children in the daytime." And here an old agricultural labourer, whose limbs are twisted and knotted with rheumatism, lying on what Heine calls his mattress-grave, unconscious that anybody is in the room, he is overheard saying to himself—

> "Jesus can make a dying bed
> Feel soft as downy pillows are,
> While on His breast I lean my head,
> And breathe my life out sweetly there."

My friends, is it fancy or fact? Do you not believe that there are more than mists in the eyes of the dying, and that that aged saint and the other men of whom I have spoken, and the innumerable company of Christian people who have had the same consciousness and have been kept pure and true and sweet by it, were building on the rock of everlasting truth, and that what you have here is not a pulpit theory, or a pious fancy, but the true and abiding word of our Lord?

Then what is the value of it? That is the next question.

It means a living presence with us here, and with our fellow-Christians in America, and in India, and Australia. A spiritual presence encompassing the globe as the atmosphere encompasses it, but personal as the atmosphere is not. It means a realizable presence. That just as truly as a man buffeted by the trials and temptations of daily business can go to his home and shut the door on his worries, and in the embrace of his loved ones can find refreshment and renewal of hope and heart and courage, so somewhere in my personality there is an inner chamber into which I

can retire and meet my Lord face to face, and feel the caress of His love and the restoring power of His grace.

You see the value of it.

Other persons and things are saying, "Lo, I am with you always." Trial says it and temptation, and to some people, trouble. A shadow settles on your life of sorrow, and you know that it has come to stay. Two of the most pathetic lines that Tennyson ever wrote, or anybody else, are in his great poem "In Memoriam"—

> "O Sorrow, wilt thou live with me,
> No casual mistress, but a wife?"

Always with me, when I lie down and when I rise up.

And there are uncongenial tasks to which you are bound and uncongenial persons with whom you must pass your days, whose lot is linked with yours irrevocably and whose ideals are the very opposite of your own. How many people dread Monday morning, to go from the blessed peace and freedom, the happy church relation and the sweet domestic circle to the girding and grinding and unappreciated tasks of the world. "I never go back to my work after a vacation," said Bishop Phillips Brooks, "without a feeling of dread." I remember a time when I never went from Sunday to Monday without this same feeling of almost horror.

Now, suppose we could hear a voice within (why not?) saying to us as we contemplated duty or trial, or as we moved forth to meet some dreaded experience, "Lo, I am with you"—nearer than your temptation, your uncongenial task or your

more uncongenial companion, nearer than your sorrow or your passion or even your sin—

> "Closer than breathing,
> Nearer than hands and feet."

Whether we hear it or not it is a fact, a great and blessed spiritual fact.

Crowd everything you legitimately can into the personal pronoun. Think of all that our Lord was in the days of His flesh, of all the love and strength and grace, the forgiving and delivering, the healing and heartening power that were in Him, and do believe that they are not associated merely with the body of His flesh. They are eternally in Him and in Him for us. They exist as truly as electricity exists, and they may be received and appropriated by faith to-day. "I am with you all the days even unto the end of the world," until there is nothing else to be gone through. You will come to the end of everything else—trial, disappointment, suffering, even death. You will come through them all—not one of them is the last experience of the soul for the Christian. He says, "*I* am the first and the last." When you have come through everything else you will come face to face with Christ, the same yesterday and to-day and for ever.

We might notice for a moment the marginal reading of the R.V.—"all the days." Dark days and bright, Sundays and Mondays; days of crisis when everything dear hangs in the balance—your investments, your little earthly hoard kept for the day of old age, or the life of some one dearer to you than all the wealth of the world; and—what is more common—days of monotony. I am very

much impressed with the monotony of the lives of most people. Teaching the same things in school to tiresome children year in and year out. Performing the same household duties. Hearing the rattle of the same machine in the factory or of the typewriter in the office. Copying out things. Standing behind a counter to serve capricious people. Charles Lamb said that he sat at his desk in the East India House till the wood had entered his soul, so wooden were his duties. When I think of this I think there is nothing that cannot become monotonous, and again I think of one of the greatest souls that God ever made, pacing the fringe of the Sinaitic desert for forty years, the companion of sheep, a solitary soul; and for forty years more leading about and about, a march without a goal of a people more stupid than the sheep, and I read "he *endured*." How? Through Divine companionship. "The Lord spoke with Moses face to face." Then all monotony went. "He endured as seeing Him who is invisible." And I think of a greater than Moses—the greatest of all—living for thirty years in the monotonous routine of an Oriental village, a peasant's cottage, and a carpenter's shop, and I say, He knows monotony, and He is with me on the dull bit of road. He may be the companion, and blessed be drudgery if He be near and I may feel the warmth of His love.

Somebody would say, perhaps, "My difficulty is here. I cannot realize an unseen Christ. If I could have seen Him in the flesh, if I could have touched His hand and heard His voice, it would have been simple and easy."

There are things to be remembered. One is that He was a great deal more real to His immediate

followers after His ascension than before. The spiritual presence was much more glorious than the physical.

Then nothing emerges more clearly from a study of personality than the fact that it is not confined to a physical organism. There is the larger self. Part of your personality is in your children or your dearest friend. If they be physically hurt or if their character be aspersed, you are injured. Here are two old people who have lived lovingly together as man and wife for over fifty years. She is called away. He is apparently quite well, but he droops and pines and fades and dies because his *alter ego* is gone. She was indeed a part of his very life, and when she died he died so far as all interest in life was concerned. I have no hesitation in believing that a large part of the personality of our Lord is in His followers and friends. They are the body of which He is the Head, or rather of which He is the indwelling Spirit. And St. Paul can say, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit." And he can say, still more daringly, "I no longer live; Christ liveth in me." Men can be as absolutely sure of Christ to-day as in any day of the past.

Finally, nothing is more certain than that personality is communicable. I can give myself to another and he can give himself to me. Some morning I am greatly depressed. It seems to me that everything is going wrong, the Church, the world, my family, and especially myself. I am under the juniper-tree. Then some cheery and optimistic friend visits me who always sees the brighter side of things, and before he has been with me half an hour he has dispelled my gloom and infected me with his hopeful spirit.

I am naturally a moral coward, but in the company of a brave soul I lose my cowardice and am clothed in the armour of his courage. There are some people in whose presence everything that is best in me lives and grows strong. I feel, "If I could always be where you are, I could be a saint." It is certain that spirit can mate with spirit, that the strength of a strong soul can pass into a weaker, that a pure soul can rescue and garrison a foul soul, that by personal influence exerted and imparted people are uplifted and saved.

Says Browning:

> "God uses us to help each other so
> Lending our minds out."

Now let it be steadfastly affirmed that closer than any human soul can come to another human soul, Christ the omnipresent Lord can come to the soul that trusts and obeys Him. It is a reasonable doctrine and a certain fact. And He communicates Himself, His purity and courage, His goodness and love. We may, as St. Paul says, receive the Lord Jesus and walk in Him, being rooted and built up in Him. In fellowship with Him we may receive daily of His fullness. Let us begin to act as if this word were true. Seneca says that in ordering our moral conduct we ought to choose some good person, the best we know, and set him always before us, living our life as if in his presence, and acting as if he saw. We know a better Person than Seneca ever knew, and we remember how one man, long before Christ came, said, "I have set the Lord always before me." Would that we could do

that! Cultivate the thought of Jesus—live every day as if in His presence, act as if He saw. Practise that with prayer and diligence, and it will soon come to pass that He will be a living reality, and you will know by blessed experience that the text is true.

VI

AUTHORITY AND FRIENDSHIP

"Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."—JOHN xv. 14.

I

YOU will mark the exact phrasing of the text. Not, I am your friend on a certain condition, but something greater than that: "*Ye are My friends.*" It is one thing for a powerful personage to be a friend to me in the day of my need, to befriend me in my poverty or trouble, to serve me out of kindly compassion or sympathy. It is a much greater thing for him to call me his friend. In the one case I am helped, in the other I am honoured and lifted up. For him to say, "You may always look upon me as a friend," means that I may rely upon his help. For him to call me his friend implies a degree of esteem and regard and intimate affection. The one may mean nothing more than kindness of heart. The other lifts me up and places me by his side.

One of our hymns to Christ begins

"O thou Great Friend to all the sons of men."

There is a very true sense in which He is the

friend of all men, but it is not true that all men are His friends. You may have rankling and burning enmity in your heart to a man who is nothing but a friend to you. When the Bible tells us that Abraham was the friend of God, it means that God regarded him with special and intimate favour. It implies a degree of intimacy unusual. So this is one of the great words of Jesus, not merely encouraging us to sing "What a Friend we have in Jesus," but rather that we may become the friends, the intimates, the associates of Jesus, and it tells us how.

It is the *how* that I ask you to consider first. The wonderful fact afterwards. "If ye do whatsoever I command you." I do not know any word of Christ in which authority and condescension are more completely blended. The way to friendship with Christ is the submission to His authority, the *complete* acceptance of that authority. It would not be true to say that the Christian life is simply obedience to Christ, or that the chief thing that He desires is our obedience. Our Lord desires far more than obedience. You can have obedience through dread. You can obey through fear. You can obey, and chafe, and even hate. You can obey with a perfectly cold heart, like the elder brother, or through sheer *pride* of obedience. A man may be honest because honesty is the best policy, not because he loves honesty but because it pays; so he may be honest and have the heart of a thief all the time. Obedience is not the chief thing, the greatest thing, that our Lord wants, as if you should go to Him for orders and punctiliously carry them out. He wants your heart, your love, your open-hearted trust and confidence. That is all perfectly true,

but He does demand obedience. And He demands it, let me say it reverently, not for His sake, but for yours, not because He loves to rule, but out of pure love to you, knowing that there is no other way of life for us save the way of obedience.

Let it be emphasized: there is no Christian life apart from submission to the authority of Christ. Then some of us mistake the Christian life. We say we have "decided." Decided what? To join the Church, to be baptized. That is not the Christian life. It is the expression and confession of it. We say we love Christ. But what do we mean by love? If it is mere kindly sentiment towards Christ or admiration of Him, that is not the Christian life. Or we say we believe certain things about Christ. That is not the Christian life. James, in his blunt way, says, "The devils also believe and tremble." Jesus says, "If any man love Me he will keep my words." The real Christian life does not exist apart from whole-hearted acceptance of the authority of Christ—complete submission to His Lordship. The submission of love, but still submission. Nothing will serve as a substitute for such submission. No amount of sentiment and no amount of religious observance and no amount of work. With the strange perversity that clings to human nature we are continually trying to discover substitutes for the obedience of heart and life which is the essence of Christian life. Our Lord brushes them aside in words such as these: "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?" He declares that He will say to loud-professing and busy men, "I never knew you; depart from Me."

There is considerable danger that the condescension of our Lord should blind us to His sovereignty, to our great loss. Do let us understand that He can never in the nature of things abdicate, or surrender the sovereignty. He is none the less our King because He serves. He will wash the feet of the disciples, but He will immediately after declare Himself their Master and Lord. I wonder whether this claim of Christ to rule over the lives of men, His continuous insistence on their obedience, surprises or puzzles anybody. Let us try to understand the basis of it by a certain number of propositions. *The first is the absolute need of authority in human life.* It is absolutely essential for the well-being of society that there should be some standard of ethics and of duty, and some power to enforce it. Find a home where there is no authority, you will find without exception an unhappy home—not a home at all, in fact. The most miserable period in the history of Israel, when the land was the prey of any chance invader, was the period of which it is written: "In those days there was no king in Israel—every man did that which was right in his own eyes." What is true of society is true of the individual. Life is never noble, never dignified, never worthy, never really useful, and never happy, save as it is under some kind of restraint, some compulsion, some law.

And, as a matter of fact, we are all *under authority of some sort.* There is something or some person that impels us or restrains us. It is perfectly clear to every reflective mind that a man may be the slave of impulse, of passion, of some degrading and ruinous habit. He may be possessed of some demon, like the demon of

greed or lust that rules and drives him, having first allured and fascinated him. You are sometimes ruled by an individual, or by a class or set of individuals. You stand in awe of their judgment, or their scorn. You covet their approval, and if you get it you feel that you are all right. Their opinion, their praise or blame, are the rule and law of your life. Often the most conscientious people are the people who feel most the need of some authoritative voice to cry dogmatically to the bewildered soul, "This is the way: walk ye in it."

We are all of us coming continually into a condition of perplexity; a kind of hopeless tangle in which we cannot see what ought to be done. Life is a maze, and we have not the clue.

And you know how the problem is solved often. Do as others do. It saves a vast amount of trouble. Give as they give, dress as they dress, follow the crowd—that is, obey fashion and custom. And some men, like Newman, take refuge in the Church of Rome, and become her docile and obedient children—her voice is the voice of authority; and some obey their own self-will, and, not considering whether a thing is right or wrong, ask only whether it pleases them. But every man needs and has some authority over his life.

The next proposition is this: *that your life and character will be determined as to their quality by the kind and nature of the authority to which you submit*—that is self-evident. Submit to a low authority and you become low and base, because, naturally, you do not rise above the authority to which you submit. *The third proposition is that the authority of Christ*

is the highest and best known among men. It is the authority of the God who made us. It is the authority of eternal righteousness and of immeasurable love. It is the authority of One who knows our human life on this side of the grave and on the other—what it is capable of, what will satisfy it and what will not, what it was made for and not made for, what are its perils and weaknesses, as no other can know, and who loves us to the giving up of everything for our sakes. It is the authority of one who has the inherent right to rule us because we belong to Him, and who, moreover, has made good His right by His infinite sacrifice. It is the authority of infinite love; the authority of the physician who knows the disorder of the diseased man; the authority of the mighty liberator over the helpless captive; the authority of one who can see over one who is blind, of one who knows the peril and can save you from it. *In His rule is salvation.* You cheat yourself when you avoid and escape the authority of Christ. Outside of His rule there is no salvation, and in His authority the soul finds rest. There can be no question; the universal testimony of experience bears witness to the fact that where the soul is completely abandoned, yielded up to the rule of Christ to do His will, and His will alone, there is rest and peace. So I preach the saving and sanctifying authority of Christ, the King, the Law-giver, the Lover, who does not make suggestions, but who issues commandments and who cries to all men, "Believe on Me; follow Me." That way lies rest and peace, and the life which is life indeed.

II

Now let me speak of the wonderful fact that follows—that where Christ becomes Lord, He becomes much more, and that it is His constant desire to establish a closer and more precious relation between us than the relation of master and servant, or teacher and taught, or king and subject. *Through obedience He is seeking something else.* Let me repeat that the chief thing that our Lord seeks is not obedience, but your love, your confidence, your trust, that in the truest sense you should give Him your heart. You know how it is with a true father or mother, the chief thing they want for their children is not dutiful obedience, not the establishment of parental authority, not that the child should consider their wish and bow to the rules of the household—all that is necessary and good; but there is something far more precious and endearing, and if that be lacking there is a hunger at the heart of the mother. It is the *confidence of the child*, its perfect trust, the love that casts out tormenting fear. If a mother has to say, "I do not know my child, there is a veil between us, he veils himself, there is a restraint; he does not give himself to me," then the main thing is not secured.

May I put it in this way and be understood? *That Christ the lover wants lovers.* That wherever love is, a vital part of it is the hunger for responsive love, and the deeper the love the greater the hunger. That the great longing of our Lord is for hearts to whom He can communicate Himself. That the great desire of our Lord is for friends with whom He can dwell on terms of

close intimacy. I want to speak carefully, because it is so wonderful and so important a thing, that Jesus our Lord longs for close intimacy, for friends to whom He can communicate Himself and reveal His deepest purposes. Would I be wrong in saying that Christ the Son of Man craves for human fellowship, for confidants, for people with whom He can share His life? You may find traces of that all through His earthly life: "He taketh with Him Peter and James and John," always longing to initiate them more fully into the purposes of His mind. "Tarry ye here and watch with Me." "All things that I have heard of My Father I have made known to you." That on one side. This on the other: "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." Continually He was barred in His efforts after the closer relations by the incapacity of His disciples. And do you not think He is barred to-day? That what He commands us for, here and there, is that we may come into the spirit in which it is possible for Him to reveal Himself to us? I have insisted upon the necessity of obedience to Christ because I am perfectly certain that we can only *know* as we *do*, and it is only in the path of obedience that He can walk with us. But, my friends, *it is that walking with us* that is the ultimate desire of Christ. You can only walk with Him as you live in His world. Let us dare to think of Him as the *living* Christ. It is the only true way of thinking, and while we can never think of Him aright without thinking of Him as Lord and King, do not let us think of Him as a taskmaster demanding service. Do not let us think that our sole portion in the Christian life is to serve and slave and deny ourselves, and sweat and strain. Let

us try to believe that what our Lord desires is fellowship.

When He went to the home at Bethany Martha seemed to think that all He wanted was an elaborate meal, which she would exhaust all her resources, including her patience, to provide, as though He were a great stranger who must be fussed and honoured. What she did not quite realize, and what Mary did, was that He came not for the dinner but for fellowship. She knew she loved and honoured Jesus; what she almost failed to see was what this Gospel declares, that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus"—loved, not patronized—and that He came to them for the rest of intimate fellowship and not for a stately, formal, and burdensome meal; and I think the Lord would rather have gone without the dinner than have seen Martha perspiring and distressed, careworn and worried and worn out with her great effort, and anxious to shine as a brilliant provider. And I venture, notwithstanding all that I have said, to affirm that what our Lord wants most of all is not your service or your gift, *but you.* That what He wants to be to all of us is not an employer or a ruler, but rather an intimate companion talking with us by the way, and making our hearts to burn within us.

I do not doubt that I am speaking to people who find it hard to do the will of God, to keep some of the commandments of Christ—a hard fight and struggle. These things will never be anything but hard and heavy if you regard them in the abstract; nay, they will be hopeless. Here is your mistake, you are fighting as if the captain were not on the field. You are looking upon the

Christian life as a duty or a task. It is a companionship, a partnership, a collaboration. It is to you, I am persuaded, to men and women toiling to do right, high-minded and conscientious, burdened and weary, that our Lord's message is addressed. "Come unto *Me* all ye that labour and are heavy laden." It is Himself He offers, and the fatal defect of the Church to-day and of many excellent Christian people, the secret of exhausting strain and weariness, is this, we are attempting the task without the companionship, trying to do the duty without the kindly fellowship. We fail to see that in Christ's intention we are not slaves but friends, and that the privilege of friends is to draw upon the resources, to use the power of the friend for the needs of the hour. There is no greater truth in the whole of Christian revelation than this, that our Lord longs to bestow Himself upon us, to communicate His grace to us, to pour out His power upon us. We have not to cry to Him to come, He pleads with us: "Behold," he says, "I stand at the door and knock," and because the mood of obedience is the only mood in which He can bestow Himself upon us, and in which we can be receptive, into that mood He seeks to woo us. Friends of Christ, confidants, companions, fellow-workers, that is what He seeks, fighting with Him, suffering with Him, conquering and reigning with Him. That is His ideal and His desire for us. May He find what He seeks, to our infinite blessing and to His glory.

VII

SORROW AND DUTY

"So I spake unto the people in the morning: and at even my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded."—EZEKIEL xxiv. 18.

THERE is here a tragic round of the clock. A man's life completely changed and his home emptied and wrecked within twelve hours. In the morning he is out proclaiming the word of God which has been laid upon his conscience. A terrific message according to the earlier part of this chapter. At what cost to himself he had spoken only God knew. He had likely gone out with a heavy heart to deliver his message; and his wife, feeling what it meant to him, had accompanied him to the door and had spoken such words of comfort and encouragement as even a strong prophet needs, and which are an unutterable blessing to the man who gets them. It may well be that there was some presentiment in the heart of both of them, some premonition of trouble, and that the parting was unusually tender. It may well have been, too, that while he was delivering his stern message his thoughts turned to the woman who (ver. 16) was the desire of his eyes. Often and often in his public ministry, the strain of

which no man knows save he who is in it, Ezekiel's home had been to him a shelter from the storm, a covert from the tempest, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. And now, the burden of his message delivered, he turns to his home again and to her who is the desire of his eyes, his home-maker, his helpmeet and comrade; and that happens which makes it home no longer. There it is compressed into a single line, a tragedy of sorrow. "I spake to the people in the morning, and at even my wife died."

In the full tide of public life there came this overwhelming private sorrow. And God had done it—not merely permitted it. The word of the Lord came to him, perhaps on his way to or from his prophesying: "Son of man, behold I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke." Suddenly she was snatched from him. And God had done it, the God whom he had faithfully served, to whose truth he had borne constant witness. There was no accident about it; to the mind of the prophet it was the act of God.

It is clear that even in Old Testament times God did not shield His chosen servants from the sorrows and sufferings that were the common lot of mankind. He did not even then bribe people into His service by setting a hedge about their possessions and guarding them from trial and calamity. Even then religion was not an insurance society against loss and sickness and death. The guarding of God was not *from* trouble but *in* it. The promise even of old time was not, "Thou shall be kept from fire and flood," but "when thou passest through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee."

Here is a man preaching in the morning, and

the message of God to him is not, "Because thou hast faithfully delivered My word, sorrow and death shall not come near thee," but, "Behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes." *There is the mystery* of life. Can we find light on it? Can it be that for a man on whom this sorrow falls God tenderly cares? Nay, is there a living God? There are various considerations *from the Christian standpoint* which I very humbly suggest to you and which may be helpful in such a problem as this. The first, which I hope will not seem irrelevant, is, that to the sweet and gracious comrade of Ezekiel's home death could not be a dread calamity. Why, in the light of the New Testament hope, will we insist on regarding death as a calamity? Even Socrates, the pagan philosopher, declared that it might be a good and not an evil, a great gain and not a loss. Death in itself can be no more a calamity than birth. It is as truly God's appointment. Why do we call "poor" those who have gone from us, our Christian dead? as though we pitied and commiserated them! Must we not believe that they are gathered into the eternal peace, the unclouded light? May we not surely hope that God has a higher place for them, and some nobler service than they could ever accomplish here, a service which will be an unwearied joy? Do let us strive to think rationally, from the Christian standpoint, of death. If we did we would say, notwithstanding all the possible blessedness of life here, that it is an experience not to be dreaded, but to be desired.

It was no calamity for Ezekiel's wife to be called out of the hurly-burly and tumult into peace, from the foulness and disorder of the life of her time into the purity of the presence of God.

But what of Ezekiel, Jehovah's faithful messenger and representative, robbed of his chief and perhaps solitary earthly comfort, bereft and stricken, the man who is bidden to sigh in silence and to make no open show of sorrow—what of him?

Well, there are two thoughts suggested in the chapter. Difficult they are to grasp and more difficult to practise, but I bring them to you; they seem to be the explanation of the prophet of his own sorrow and loss.

The first is that it might be demonstrated before the eyes of those about him how a man of faith —a representative of God—can bear sorrow. Not how he can escape it, but how, with what fortitude and courage, with what calmness and strength, he can bear it, and also what God Himself can be to such a man in such a time.

I suggest to you seriously, brethren, that this may be God's way of demonstrating the value of faith and religion, not that a man thereby can escape and save his own skin, but that he can endure and triumph over the things that break other men, that make them bitter and cynical and rebellious. That in such times as this the superiority of the manhood that faith creates and nourishes is to be demonstrated. Anybody can break out or break down. Anybody can be impatient and rebellious. It requires no genius of any sort to be sceptical. These are not wonderful at all; the wonderful thing is when a man endures, when he believes and continues to believe, when he clings to God and says, "Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him." When his faith cannot be conquered even by sorrow.

I believe, my friends, that this is partly God's

method. That He says concerning men like Paul, "I will show him how great things he must suffer for my sake." The great argument of the first Epistle of Peter seems to be on these lines. Indeed, may we not affirm that the supreme example of proof of this is seen in our Lord, who without distrust or rebellion passed through a darker sorrow than can ever sweep across the soul of man?

It may be questioned whether there is anywhere so strong and impressive a Christian evidence as is to be found in trial or suffering or loss bravely and trustfully borne, a heavy cross cheerfully carried, irritation patiently endured. It has pleased God by this means to put to silence the scoff and the sneer, to touch and turn the hearts of men—not of the sufferers, but of those who saw them. I remember an invalid in the village of my birth who for more than a quarter of a century lay on her bed a helpless sufferer. I question whether anybody in the village for a good part of that time wielded a greater or sweeter Christian influence. She was quite a young girl when the illness befell her. Scores of people, myself among the number, were taken to see her. She loved to know and to pray for everybody. I remember her face to this day—as many others do. It was as the face of an angel. Shut out from the brightness, the play, and the work of life, condemned to pain and weakness, she was never known to murmur or to be impatient; and through her suffering, bravely and sweetly borne, God wrought a mighty work in the hearts of many.

And it may be along that line still that God will largely touch the heart of the world; there may be no cheaper way. It may well have been that

Ezekiel's sorrow and his way of bearing it touched the hearts of men as nothing else in his ministry had done, and that it gave his words a power which they had never possessed before. And it may be that God is still calling for men who are willing to take this costly way of reaching the hearts of others and saving them from sin and rebellion and unbelief.

Here is what Lynch says—

"I would live in such a course
That men to me may say,
'O whence hast thou thy joy and force?
What is thy secret stay?'
My joy when truest joy I have
It comes to me from heaven,
My strength when I from weakness rise
Is by Thy Spirit given."

There is a witness which will make its impression always.

And if it be true that this is one of God's ways of reaching the hearts of others, this may surely be said, that He Himself feels the sorrow and suffering of His servants. "In all their afflictions He is afflicted." A necessary part of love is that it suffers in the sufferings of the person loved. You may be certain of this, that wherever a true mother finds it necessary to punish her child, and the punishment is administered not in the heat of passion but from a stern, sorrowful sense of duty, it hurts her far more than it hurts the child. It is indeed so difficult a duty that many parents forgo it altogether. I believe in the absolute truth of Psalm ciii. 13, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him, and therefore I believe that the chastisements of

His children cost God a great deal more than they cost us; that if manhood and redemption of character could be achieved in any cheaper way they would be so achieved; that if God could, consistently with our highest good, bear our sufferings for us, He would do so. And what you get in the mystery of the cross is not God inflicting suffering, but suffering Himself. God was in Christ there as elsewhere reconciling the world unto Himself. I read again the statement of John iii. 16, "God so loved the world," and I know that where love is there must be fellowship in suffering, and I believe that every bit of human sorrow—every throb of pain, all anguish and torture, every bitter scalding tear, is felt by the infinite heart of God; and therefore if it were possible to discipline and redeem, to emancipate and ennoble, human character without suffering, God would do it.

The second purpose, according to the later verses of the chapter, seems to be that by this experience of sorrow Ezekiel may be fitted to be an effective helper of others.

He is to be a "sign" to these people. That is, for one thing, when their sorrows come upon them they will do as he had done. They will remember his courage and fortitude. As one of our hymns says—

> "Till all that are distressed,
> From my example comfort take,
> And soothe their grief to rest."

But chiefly this great sorrow of the prophet was to qualify him to be a true teacher and helper of others. I am very deeply impressed with the words of verses 25–6: "Also, thou son of man, shall it not be, in the day when I take from them their

strength, the joy of their glory, the desire of their eyes . . . that he that escapeth in that day shall come unto thee, to cause thee to hear it." (Perhaps he would never have come but that he remembered Ezekiel's sorrow.) "In that day shall thy mouth be opened to him, and thou shalt speak and be no more dumb."

How often you are dumb before another person's tragic trouble! How often you hear people say: "Only those who have passed through my trouble can understand it or enter into it." And it is true in the heart of it. Only the poor can truly know the feelings of the poor. Only the man who has struggled can fully enter into the struggles of others; only one whose heart has been broken can bind up the broken heart of another. Other people may want to, but they are living largely in another world, and it is only experience that breaks down the barrier and crosses the frontier. It seems indeed to be necessary that God should become man and share our experience in order to become our helper and Saviour, and to make us believe in His sympathy, and it is because our Lord was tempted and tried in all points like as we are that our hearts are drawn to Him in confidence and trust. For my own part I cannot doubt that God leads some men into deep experiences for the sake of others. It is a costly process, that of being qualified to be a comforter of the broken-hearted, a healer of sick souls, the speaker of a word in season to him who is weary—a costly school to graduate in. Through his personal sorrow God taught Ezekiel and Hosea and many a prophet how to minister effectively to their country and their time, and I suppose there is no easier way.

Certain it is that out of these great experiences men have risen, to be no longer dumb in the presence of the sorrows of their kind.

Out of Tennyson's personal bereavement came his greatest poem, "In Memoriam." Out of one man's blindness come homes for the blind.

I am aware, of course, that there may be no such blessed result. A man may bury himself in his sorrow, may brood over it until it makes him bitter and rebellious, resentful and useless. But that is where the Divine intention is foiled. When God's purpose is carried out, sorrow opens and does not close the heart, and suffering and adversity are turned to gracious and glorious effect in the enrichment of the life with new powers of service.

I have dealt so far with the purposes of trouble. Finally, observe how this man behaved in the midst of his trial.

See what happens the very morning after the shock had fallen. "I did as I was commanded." That is, he went on with his prophetic ministry. He did not sit hopelessly brooding. He obeyed the imperative call of duty. The blow had fallen, life could never be the same again, but it was still to be lived; there was work to be done, there were people to live for and to minister to. So he hid his broken heart, and with such courage as he could muster went to work amid the sorrows and the wreckage of his time. So I think sorrow becomes transfigured. Men do not get over it, but they convert it into a ministry of good and blessing. It is a great picture this, and it is painted that we may be impressed by it. There is so much grief in the world that is peevish and fretful and helpless; so many people put out

of action by difficulty and adversity; so much of what Martineau calls "sorrow with the downward look," and that on the part of Christian people.

It may be questioned whether God is ever more truly glorified or the doctrine of God our Saviour adorned than when men in the strength of Divine companionship and sympathy and sustaining grace go on with the service of their fellow-creatures, pursue the old path of duty, or busy themselves about the needs and sorrows of others.

When John Bright lost his wife, Richard Cobden visited him in his stricken bereavement, and in the midst of his sorrow urged him in the name of humanity to take up public work; and to the enrichment of this nation's public life and to the blessing of his own soul Bright obeyed that call, and found thereby healing for his grief. There are some of us with our private worries and cares and sorrows equal to or less or greater than the sorrow of that great man. Our tendency is to brood over them, to withdraw ourselves from the claims of others and their needs, to withdraw from the work of the Church and from interest in public life. It is one of the worst things we can do, even for ourselves. It is only less bad than immersing ourselves in our pleasures and our gains. There is a nobler way here, and it is the way to peace and comfort and joy, viz., to give ourselves to duty, to the call of God, and to the service of humanity. So men have found joy in sorrow, healing for a bleeding wound, and an augmented efficiency in service for God and man, into which service may we all be led.

VIII

STEDFAST AND ABOUNDING: WHY?

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."—1 Corinthians xv. 58 (R.V.).

THE Apostle strikes a vitally important chord in the very first note of this exhortation, "My beloved brethren, be ye stedfast." It is a great quality, the power of keeping on, of "pegging away," as Abraham Lincoln would say. It is the secret and the guarantee of ultimate success in any legitimate enterprise, as instability is the secret of innumerable failures. "Be ye stedfast, unmoveable." Do not be driven from your course by difficulty, or discouragement, or disappointment, or hardship. Do not be allured from it by any tempting offer of ease or honour or reward. Be stedfast, unmovable, yielding neither to bribes nor threats.

It is an exhortation the like of which is often found in St. Paul's writings. It is akin to his great cry, "Be not weary in well-doing, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might"; and it strikes you as a cry that he must have often uttered to himself. For he too had occasional

depression, "great sorrow and heaviness of heart." We may be quite sure that there is not a man anywhere engaged in any great and testing enterprise whose heart does not fail him now and then, and who does not ask himself wistfully, "Is it worth while?"

And again, it strikes you as a piece of inspired advice, like many of Paul's words, which is exceedingly difficult to carry out, especially for some people.

How can a man be stedfast who is unstable, or a weak character be strong? As well talk of agility to a cripple, or of mountain-climbing to a man with a weak heart.

Well, I take it that the very frequency of this kind of inspired counsel in the Bible opens the door of hope to thousands. It is a fatal mistake to think of any man's character as being settled and doomed. Surely it is truer to think that character is not finished, but is being made or mended. The broken wing of the bird can be mended; the cripple can be healed; the lame man can be made to leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb to sing. The grace of stedfastness can be bestowed, strength of character can be developed. Persistency and the power of stubborn perseverance is a gift of God, who can make mighty the weak things of the world. So that a man can say, "When I am weak, then am I strong."

Every man can do a great deal to rally his own failing purpose and courage. He can reinforce his faltering determination by the direction which he gives to his thoughts. He can get great motive power by dwelling on certain facts or examples or possibilities. That is the line on which Paul

constantly goes. He does not give a bare exhortation which might be something in the air which ordinary men could not reach. He bases it on a solid argument, or fact, or reason.

The basis of his exhortation here is, as you know, his great argument on the resurrection. He can see plainly enough that death is coming. Every man should frankly face that unescapable and solemn fact. St. Paul looked into the face of death nearly every day. "I die daily," he says. He kept company with death until it lost all terror for him. It was under certain circumstances so little a thing that he declared Christ had abolished it. It was scarcely a shadow to him. It was rather a doorway into the light. The other side was so real and he had so little of material possessions, that death could hardly touch him. He sings a song of triumph over death in this chapter. It cannot destroy him. It can only liberate him by the will of God. Death means, to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord.

And what he seems to say here is, "Be stedfast, unmovable, because you may do a work that death cannot destroy, which it cannot even touch."

You know how differently he might have argued. If he had taken the position of Ecclesiates, that what happens to the wise man happens to the fool and even to the beast, the very thought of death might have cut the nerve of all high endeavour. Even to Christian people the thought of death sometimes has an almost paralysing effect. We think pensive thoughts about it and sing rather melancholy hymns, as—

> "We fade away like flowers in the sun,
> We just begin, and then our work is done."

That is largely because our thoughts are all on this side. Our preparations for death mainly concern our worldly affairs. We do not pierce the veil. We speak of the property which a man has left behind him, rather than of the life into which he is gone. Our pleasures and possessions are mainly of this world, and it is painful to think that they will cease. I venture to say that St. Paul would never have sung such a verse as I have quoted. He would never have said, "We just begin, and then our work is done." He dared to believe that his work, like himself, would be immortal; and history has amply vindicated his belief. It all depends on what your work is. You may be stedfast and unmovable in a work which death will sweep as completely away as the tide blots out the child's castle of sand. But you need not build like that. We were never made to build like that. Men are such fools that they persist in building like that, and both their names and their works perish. But that is not God's will for you or for me or for any man. You can so build as to defy death. A man can so live that so far from his work being done when death finds him, it may only just have started. Let me choose one name out of a thousand in proof of what I am saying—the name of John Bunyan. John Bunyan did not live to be an old man. What did death do to the work of John Bunyan? Destroy it? It was simply indestructible. He was never so influential as after his death. Before his death he preached to a few people, after it he preached to innumerable millions. His body lies mouldering in the grave, but his soul is marching on. The Roman soldier can behead St. Paul, but no power on earth can

kill him. And that immortality is open to far lesser souls than St. Paul and Bunyan. I go to a home from which the mother was taken in her prime, leaving her children. I visit it a quarter of a century after, and I find her influence living and working as strong as ever. I go to some country village where generations ago a godly minister lived and laboured. He has stamped his spirit on that community. It is there still, and not there only, but is carried to a hundred places and reproduced by those who came under the spell of his character and influence. There is the possibility.

You see the Apostle's point of view—mark it well. Not, Life is so short and precarious and the world so evil and growing worse that we had better shut ourselves up from it and watch for the Lord's coming. Not that, but, "Work stedfastly and abundantly and do the work that will abide." And he defines the work—*the work of the Lord*, he calls it. What is the work of the Lord? It is a comprehensive term. Remember he is writing to Christian people in whom the work of the Lord has been done, and now by whom it is to be done. If it be true—and it is—that if the work of God is to be done by you it must be done in you, we may also be perfectly certain that every man who is converted to God is converted that he may work, and that there is a work of the Lord to which every one of us ought to put his hand.

And while we give a broad interpretation to the term, it must also be stated that there are some things that are emphatically not the work of the Lord. The work of the Lord is surely that which He would have done, which aids in the accomplishment of His will and purpose.

It is also that which is done for His sake and in co-operation with Him. That can never be the work of the Lord that injures or degrades others. That man is not doing the work of the Lord who lives to himself, nor he who is making himself rich by the ill-paid labour of others, exploiting them for his own gain and advantage. It may be questioned whether piling up a huge fortune, in face of the world's crying need and in the face of the teaching and example of Christ, is ever the work of the Lord, and whether in the ultimate issue it is not labour in vain. It may be said, moreover, that he who does things solely for his own honour and glory, even though they be religious things, is not doing the work of the Lord. He is doing his own work, and it probably will not abide. What we call Christian work may be vitiated and degraded by a low and bad and selfish motive, so that it is an offence to God. There may be no prayer in it and no self-abandonment, no love for Christ and no vital touch with Him in it. In this very letter St. Paul says that a man may build on Jesus Christ a building of wood and hay and stubble which will be simply burnt to ashes in the day of trial.

I tell you, brethren, that I have to watch my own heart very carefully lest the work that I do in the church and out of it ceases to be the work of the Lord, and becomes a little bit of work of my own. But granted the right motive, and I sometimes think you had better work with a poor motive than not work at all, or than be idle because of a poor motive—there are some things which are certainly the work of the Lord. We are apt to say in the broad and generous spirit of which we are very proud that all work that

is of help to man is the work of the Lord, that much work outside the Church is the work of the Lord, and that all labour may be consecrated. I believe that to be quite true, and I also believe that some work is of far greater and higher help to man than other work, and more truly deserves to be called the work of the Lord. There is work that deals with higher interests, with more solemn and awful issues than other work—work which touches the vital springs of character and helps to transform human life. There is no doubt, for example, that a man who makes clothes or builds houses, or supplies provisions for men, may, by high motive and conscientious principle, be doing the work of the Lord, for it may be fairly argued that it is God's will that men should be clothed and fed and housed. But it may be claimed at the same time that it is far more truly the work of the Lord to get at a man's soul, to open his eyes to spiritual realities, to bring him into the conscious presence of Christ, to help to break the power of evil in his life, and to make him a disciple of the holy and saving Christ. And I take it that this is what Paul means by the work of the Lord, and it is this that needs emphasis, supreme emphasis, to-day; for a man may be housed and clothed and fed, and still be a lost man and a bad man. Whereas if a man be brought under the saving power of Jesus Christ, the evidence commonly goes to show that the housing and feeding and clothing have a wonderful way of coming all right. And there, moreover, is the work that will permanently abide, and that death cannot destroy, work on the soul and character. What I am anxious to insist upon to-day is that the formation and the

support of the Christian Church, the organized spiritual society in the midst of which Christ declares He is, is pre-eminently the work of the Lord. It is not in my judgment an optional matter whether the Christian man joins a Church and helps its projects, or holds aloof from it. There is a sacred and solemn duty laid upon every follower of Christ. He has a relation to sustain and an obligation to discharge to his fellow-believers in all their imperfections from which he cannot honourably escape. He belongs to them; service is due and gift is due from him; and the slight regard in which Church fellowship is held by many people betrays a low spiritual condition, and a poor conception of the Christian life. Surely, if the work of the Lord is anywhere on earth, it is in the Christian Church to which His presence is pledged, as to no other society in the world.

Then the work of the Lord undoubtedly is *the proclamation of the gospel.* The propagation of the truth as it is in Jesus, at home and abroad, in the village and in the slum. The maintenance of that truth against error and falsehood, against worldly living and false thinking and bad teaching. Once again, there is no option. If our Christian profession is to be anything more than a mere formality or a solemn mockery, we are bound to bear our part in that which makes for the propagation of Christian truth—the truth that it is God's will shall be spread everywhere, the truth that enlightens and convinces and saves; and there is something radically wrong with us if we are not interested in this.

And once more, the work of the Lord is *the*

salvation of men. I ought almost to apologize for venturing to remind you that it was for this very purpose that Christ came, for this that He lived and taught and died and rose again. For this He called His disciples and Apostles and formed His Church, saying of Himself, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost." Saying of His people, "As Thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I sent them into the world." I ought almost to ask your pardon for reminding you that this was Paul's absorbing and consuming ambition, the thing for which he lived and laboured and suffered, and, I believe, the very thing to which he is exhorting in my text. And it is the thing we are not working at, that we are neglecting too sadly, that we, some of us, are indifferent about. It will not be done without preaching or without the Church; but it will not be done without that most precious thing, personal effort and personal influence.

I am afraid, if the truth were known, that there is an appalling failure here on the part of a great multitude of professed disciples of Christ. We have not caught the passion of our Master. We have not realized that we are set near to people in the home and the social circle and in business that we may win them. They are sent into the neighbourhood of our churches that we may win them. And too often we do nothing; too often, alas! we allow them to win us. We go with them; we doff our religion to make ourselves agreeable. So far from being stedfast in the work of the Lord, we are, some of us, not touching it. And others of us have got discouraged in it; we were turned out of the way by difficulty and choked off by discouragement, or we got tired and simply left off.

And there are others who are in it in a measure but are not abounding in it. We do it in a cheap and slack way. Compared with what we spend on ourselves we spend very little either of strength or money on the work of the Lord. We owe our *all* to Christ, and His holy service has cost us very little. It has not been the business of life. It has not been the one thing in life that we have believed in and lived for. We spend so much on our pleasures nowadays that we have little left for the cause of Christ.

I read these great words over and I feel their beauty: "Stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord," and I feel how awfully far we are away from them. How many people do you know of whom they are literally true? Do they not, my beloved brethren, rebuke us and shame us all, for our languor, our half-heartedness, our uselessness, or loss of interest in the things of the Kingdom? What shall we do? Why, welcome the rebuke and pray for forgiveness and for a breath of new life to-day.

And begin again. Give yourself afresh to the Christ who is here. Think of the costly way in which He has served you. And pray that His spirit may be in you. And give yourself to the bit of work that lies before you to-day, with all your heart, with generous energy, with sacrificial love. Do something before the day closes. Begin. Begin again. Make a new start. Believe that the work of the Lord is the one work worth doing, the one work that ultimately satisfies and brings peace to the doer, the one work that is never in vain.

IX

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour . . . it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."—MATTHEW v. 13.

IT would have been a great thing if our Lord had only said the first part of this verse—great enough to be called tremendous. A little company of people were gathered about Him on the hillside, and if He had said nothing to them but this, "Ye are the salt of the earth," it would have indicated for them an exceedingly great and high calling, a quality and a function of a high order. We can all see what it means. A cleansing and conserving or preservative influence among men wherever they might be, to purify and purge what is bad, to sustain and preserve that which is good. To be a pungent and health-giving influence in society and in the world, to be aseptic and antiseptic—that is what our Lord intended His Church and His disciples to be. It means that the Church of Christ has a high function in the world, and therefore that every member of the Church has.

It indicates that Christian people are to live

among men and not in cloistered seclusion. They cannot be the salt of the earth if they keep themselves aloof from it. The earth is to have the advantage of their presence in it. While there is a vital difference between the "salt" and the "earth," it is plain that the one is to mix with the other, for that other's benefit. And the very idea would indicate also that all the evil, all the corrupting and unwholesome influences that are in the world are the concern and the business of Christian people, your business being to resist and to overcome them. The inherent idea in the term is *influence, leadership,* a positive influence possessed and exerted, and continually exerted on human life and society. There are two kinds of influence to be noted. The first is involuntary and unconscious, and that is always being exerted. It flows naturally from what a man *is*, from his character and spirit. Let a man *be* what the Beatitudes indicate, and he will, *ipso facto*, be salt of the earth without engaging in any definite and specific mission among his fellows. The fact of his character and example will be a living and potent fact that men will have to reckon with and that will always tell.

But beyond this there is the influence that is exerted by definite and earnest endeavour, by effort that has passion in it. It does not mean that disciples are to go among men and live a clean and pure life merely, but surely that they are to exert effort. They are to go where the unwholesome and putrid things are, and to fight against them. They are not merely to wield a passive influence, as flowers do, exhaling their perfume; they are to be actively employed; not silently living their life, but bearing witness. Many after-words of our Lord bear that out, as

"Go ye and make disciples," and "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

By such words as these our Lord seeks to lift us up to a due sense of our importance in the world. We are not nonentities of no value or account. If we are in Christ we are not to abdicate our functions in this fashion. We are a force to be reckoned with, and every Church ought to be that. You are not to say, "It is of no use for me to utter my protest—I can do nothing." Ye are the salt of the earth. There is a certain quality in you, derived indeed from your connection with Christ, but which gives pungency and weight to your witness and protest and which makes it mighty. The salt is not merely to be in existence, it is to be applied.

The term marks a great vocation for the Christian Church. It was what God had intended the Jewish nation to be among the nations, and no doubt they had failed, and now Christ passes it on to His Church. *Ye* are the salt. You have come into this great responsibility. You are set in the world to fulfil this function, and so you live your life in Christ, you are dowered with that which will enable you to fulfil it. Is it not a great function to sweeten the world, and to keep it sweet and pure?

That is the business of the Church and of the Christian. Being a Christian and being a fellowship of Christians really involves that.

One wonders whether we realize it and whether we are to any extent trying to fulfil it. Because while it is quite true that we may be exerting an influence of which we are largely unconscious, it is also true that we can never carry out this high vocation to the full without

earnest effort. There is the great thing to set before ourselves. It means of course that *we have to convert the world.* If we take the two metaphors used here we are to have—

> "Power on this dark world to lighten it,
> And power on this dead world to make it live."

And now our Lord says the startling thing: "*The salt may lose its savour.*" He supposes a case in the chemical world in which the salt becomes insipid and tasteless. Now, He says, it is good for nothing, and just as you see people to-day in Jerusalem or any Oriental city flinging the refuse out of their houses into the street to mingle with its dust or filth, so men will do with salt that has become tasteless.

Now I have nothing to do with what may happen in the chemical world. I am in the realm of character, the moral and spiritual realm. Everybody can see our Lord's meaning. It is the same as in verse 23 of the next chapter: "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness," and everybody who has not some theory to uphold can see that it means spiritual declension, the loss of influence, the loss of power. The light put out, the pungent thing becomes insipid.

To me these are some of the most terrible words in the Bible; they fill me with alarm and dread. "Good for nothing." I hope and pray that I may die before they become true of me. For really to all intents and purposes a person is dead, or he might as well be dead, of whom you can say that. The veriest drudge in the world is infinitely to be preferred to the lazy, languishing creature of whom this could be said, "Good for nothing."

I know, of course, that there are many people who are not alarmed at such a prospect. Their ambition soars no higher than to be harmless.

They are quite satisfied if they have not been guilty of any glaring vice. They are absolutely useless; they render no service to the community, no one would think of turning to them for comfort or help or any costly service, but they are quite surprised that anybody should complain of their lives. Their comfort is that there are many people worse than they are. You see the salt is not pernicious, not poisonous, it doesn't corrupt people, it is not bad for everything; it is simply good for nothing, it makes no difference—you might as well be without it. And applied to a man and a Christian it means simply this—you are a dead failure. Of the very purpose of your existence you have failed, and I tell you, brethren, I am horrified at the idea, and I learn my horror from the Bible. The sin of uselessness —of sitting still, not going over the Jordan to fight, of not going up to the help of the Lord, of not using your talent, of not rescuing the wounded man by the wayside—is the sin that is branded in the Bible with God's condemnation. Here it is in awful words in this very Gospel: "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Why? "For I was hungry and ye gave Me no meat," etc. You were simply good for nothing. That is what fills me with horror—because I know I was never intended to live like that. To live to myself, to spend my money on myself, on my own pleasures, however harmless, and let the tide of the world's need and misery and vice flow by me unchecked, unsweetened, unhealed. I may be very comfort-

able. I may have amassed a considerable amount of money. There are plenty of people not vicious people who are living like that. They think, as Drummond says, that the chief end of man is to glorify himself and enjoy himself for ever. Or as he says again—

> "They live for themselves, they think for themselves,
> For themselves and nothing beside,
> Just as if Jesus had never lived,
> As if He had never died."

And however attractive such a life as that may seem, it is condemned by the teaching of the Book and by the life and teaching of Christ. It is, indeed, to fail of the very purpose for which we are sent here.

And it is a possibility. According to the wording of the text, a man may descend to that who has been something else better. A man may come into this condition who has been a mighty power for good. Have you not known it in your experience? Somebody who used to be generous and has now gradually retired from giving; who used to be interested in great causes, but whose interest in missions has died out; who was once concerned about getting people reached with the gospel, but is now quite unconcerned whether they are reached or not. Keen and pungent at one time, and now absolutely cold and unmoved. Abounding in zeal and good works once, and now doing nothing. The light has gone out, the interest and holy influence are dead.

My dear brethren, one of the perils of middle life is the peril of the salt losing its savour, of a man leaving off to do good, retiring from the front rank of fighting men, ceasing to watch with Christ

and to labour with Him for the salvation of the world. May God help us to conquer the peril. For we had better lose all our possessions than lose this.

The loss may come in another and even more subtle way. You may keep on with your effort, but the effectiveness may have gone out of it. I have heard a preacher before now described as a spent force. He is talking just as much and perhaps just as eloquently, but somehow the old effect is no longer there. The unction is gone; nobody takes any notice now. The indefinable weight, the tone of authority, the grace and power that once clothed the word seem to be lacking. It is a pathetic thing to be dead while you are still living; and from subtle causes, such as the lack of secret prayer, or as compromise with the world, that power has gone. "He said, 'I will go out and shake myself as at other times,' and he wist not that the Lord had departed from him." There is the situation, from which may God in His great mercy preserve us.

It may happen to a whole Church of people. "I have against thee this, 'thou hast left thy first love.' 'Thou hast a name that thou livest and thou art dead.'" There is the judgment of Christ over two Churches in Asia Minor. And we know that the Churches of Asia and Africa became so corrupt that in the seventh century the Mohammedan sword swept them out of God's house. They became literally good for nothing but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men. Has it never struck you that a living Mohammedanism may be better than a dead Christianity, as a living dog is better than a dead lion? And a Church of modern times may become dead. An extinct

volcano a negligible quantity. An institution of which no evil-doer is afraid, whose rebuke nobody fears, whose witness nobody heeds, whose denunciation nobody dreads, which never heals human misery and sheds light on no problem, which is of no earthly use and therefore of no heavenly use, whose invitations nobody accepts, whose halls are deserted and whose influence is nil. It is a terrible thing when you can say that it would make no real difference to the world and to a neighbourhood if a Church should pass out of existence.

Has it ever occurred to you, my brethren, that God has no place for dead wood in the tree of His Church, and, what is more, no place for a fruitless branch in the true Vine? Quietly and solemnly our Lord says, "Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh it away." There is no more harm in the fruitless branch than in the barren fig-tree, but God has ultimately no use for it. "If the salt have lost its savour . . . it is thenceforth good for nothing."

Do you not dread that? Do you not pray to be kept or delivered from it?

Where is the remedy? Where is the way to the acquirement or the recovery of influence, to the fulfilment of your destiny?

You know what I am going to say now, nevertheless I will say it though it has been said a thousand times before. You must avoid complicity with the evil thing that you are intended to resist. You must watch against the ever-encroaching influences of the world. Watch against carnal desires. They are quenching the light in thousands of lives. Watch against the love of pleasure, and the love of money, and the

love of self; "make no provision for the flesh that you should obey it in the lusts thereof." Listen to the advice of Paul to Timothy: "Thou, O man of God, flee these things; keep thyself pure." And the greater and more positive thing, *keep close to Christ.* All in you that is aseptic and antiseptic is derived. While there are influences about you that sap the pungency and purifying character of your life, there may be streaming into you constantly influences that renew and restore it. Renew to-day your contact with Him, give yourself again to Him. It is deplorable beyond words to think of the number of purely nominal disciples that there are in the Church: people exerting no influence, people who are going in for all the pleasures of the world and who have no joy or resource of a spiritual kind. People who never had or who seem to have lost their interest and their joy in things spiritual. Let us ask ourselves, "Am I among the number?" And if it be so, if the salt have lost its savour, I believe it can regain it. Whatever be the fact in the chemical world, the fact in the spiritual world is the possibility of restoration. The message of the Risen Lord to the two Churches who had lost love and life was, "There is a way back." Contact may be restored, communication may be re-established. There is a spiritual lost-property office, where lost fervours and enthusiasms can be recovered. At the feet of Christ again to-day, as at the first, in new surrender we may find life from the dead.

X

ZEALOUS FOR THE GOOD

"And who is he that will harm you, if ye be zealous of that which is good? . . . fear not. . . . Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord."—1 PETER iii. 13–15 (R.V.).

THE text is evidently a rallying-cry to people who are afraid, in danger at least of moral cowardice, even of being paralysed with fear. They were on the side of an unpopular cause. They were in a despised minority. The air was full of threatenings against the Christian faith, especially when it assumed an aggressive attitude. If it could be accommodating and harmless, so meek and mild that it was difficult to recognize it, it might pass unmolested and unnoticed. But I suppose Christian people had proved that to openly avow their faith, and especially to earnestly advocate it, meant trouble. To be positive, to be *zealous* for that which was good, meant scorn, suffering, the loss of goods or of employment, the heavy hand of persecution. And they were in danger—these Christians who were scattered abroad, who were really set in their different places to be the light of the world—of hiding their light under a bushel, of being ashamed of Christ and terrified out of their faith. And this is the appeal and challenge of the text, "Who *is* he that shall harm you?"

You are thinking far too much of *him* and far too little of Jesus Christ, and far too little of the noble and beautiful character of the thing you are called to do. Far too much of the forces against you, allowing them to dominate and determine your course, and far too little of the forces that are on your side. "Who is he that will harm you?" Perhaps he is terrible enough to look at if you only look at *him*; but you must not confine your attention to him. If you see nothing else but the thing that threatens, you don't see truly—you will exaggerate that out of all true proportion. You must look at the good you are called to do; most of all you must look at Him who is on your side when you try to do the good. Let Him dominate your action and determine your course. Sanctify Him as Lord—not the things that threaten. "If God be for us, who is against us?" If the one thing be true, the other does not matter.

Surely the inspiring counsel of the text gathers force from the experience of the man who wrote it. He knew what it was to be afraid and ashamed. He had broken down and hidden his light and had been a pitiable coward. And then he had found his courage, and he had faced rulers and priests and imprisonment and death, and much more, without a tremor. He had discovered how little really all these were and how little they could do, and how real and great and sufficient the power and love and companionship of Christ were, and so he wrote, "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be *zealous for that which is good*?"

I

It is in the latter part of that challenging question that I find a fitting definition, an essential

quality of the Christian life: "*zealous for that which is good.*" Everything that is good—goodness in character and in relationship. Christianity is not merely a system seeking to get itself established in society. It is that which seeks purely the good of society, the salvation of society from all that mars and afflicts and destroys; the establishment in society of all that is pure and true and sweet and good. You must take the words "that which is good" along with "Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord." Let Him teach you what is good. Then *be zealous* for it. There is the thing that is needed as sorely to-day as when this letter was written. Mark the term carefully, "*zealous*," not well-disposed, well-wishing. I do not personally get much help out of a man who says concerning some scheme that I have in hand, "I wish you well with it." He is not going to oppose me, but it means in nine cases out of ten that he is not going to help the scheme, and, indeed, is not going to think anything about it. He may mean that he is not going to help me. He may even mean that he thinks I am wrong.

There are any number of well-wishers towards that which is good. There are very few enthusiasts. It is one thing to hold up your hand in favour of a resolution. It is another thing to put your hand in your pocket or to set it to the task to help it through. You see well-wishing costs nothing, and often it is worth as little as it costs. It takes nothing out of you, it requires no effort, it is a cheap way of getting credit, and I think the Christian people of Peter's day were in danger of taking refuge in it. We all are in high and difficult matters. We wish well to every good cause, we like to hear that missions prosper, that a

Church is progressing, that justice is being done, that things are going forward. We are on the side of justice and righteousness on the whole, and we are on the side of missions, and of all efforts that are made to bring about better conditions of living. Nobody ever heard us say a word against them. No; but who ever heard of our doing anything considerable on their behalf, incurring any sacrifice, running any risk? We may admire the people who are wearing themselves out in some noble cause, and yet not lift a finger to ease their strain. My brethren, we might clear out the whole tribe of well-wishers from many a cause without the cause suffering in the slightest degree. It might even be the stronger for the clearance. It is something entirely different that we have here—"*zealous*," a positive term, with colour, motion, fire in it. That is the thing needed in the cause of Christ to-day. Fire—not the thing that makes a great noise, but which burns steadily and constantly. Some holy passion against wrong or on behalf of right; some passion of love for God and men. Are we not suffering from the *laissez-faire* temper, the almost utter lack of earnestness, until people come to think that we—preachers and all—do not mean business? Are we not losing the aggressive, the propagandist, and missionary spirit?

I said we need it. It is not certain that we all *want* it. If a spirit of burning were to appear even in the Church it would disturb some of us. The favourite quotation of many people in religion is, "Let your moderation be known to all men"; in religion, not in other things. There is plenty of zeal in sport and amusement, plenty in business in some quarters; any amount of it in things that do

not matter a straw, or will not twenty years hence; but in the things that vitally matter, where is the enthusiasm? Who is burning hot in Christian service? who is enthusiastic in prayer? Where is the man who is keen on getting his neighbour into the Christian life? Where in the Church to-day is the zealous Bible student? Where is the minister ablaze with the passion for souls? I do not doubt that they are to be found here and there, like trees in Palestine now; but who will dare to say that this spirit is characteristic of the whole Church? Is not the approved type of Church member the Laodicean, the moderate man who is neither cold nor hot, who looks for the broad and easy way, and whom, I am afraid, the New Testament condemns out and out?

I am perfectly convinced that many of us need to practise moderation in some things, in some habits of life, which are just now running away with our time and our money and our strength, absorbing and mastering us; but I tell you that the world does not know to-day, and the Church does not know, a single man whose zeal for goodness, for the salvation of the world, for the Kingdom of God, needs to be restrained, and whose enthusiasm does not need to be stimulated; and, indeed, unless some quickening come speedily the Church may become a defunct or useless institution within a few generations.

Pursue the "live-and-let-live" policy, be agreeable to everybody, sink your vital convictions, smile upon everything, evil as well as good, condemn nothing, insist on nothing, interfere with nobody, plead with nobody, lay yourself out to catch nobody, to save nobody, leave the devil alone as he wishes, and the Church of Christ is just as well dead

as alive. It is dead to all high intents and purposes. We need to remember that St. Paul never said, "Let your moderation be known to all men." What he did say was, "Let your forbearance be known to all men." What was said of our Lord was, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." His disciples remembered that it was written of Him, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten Me up."

What He said to His Church was, "Ye are the salt of the earth; ye are the light of the world; let your light shine." "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me," "Go ye and make disciples," etc. And all that will not be accomplished by living a merely harmless life. That is no better than a book of blank pages. A dummy book—less evil than a vicious book, no doubt—but decidedly uninspiring and uninteresting. Nobody is the better for it, and it might as well not exist. So life may be a barren fig-tree, a really useless thing, disappointing to God and men, and I pray that we may be inspired of God with a higher ambition than that.

I do not know any prayer that we need more to offer for the Church of Christ to-day than the prayer that God will baptize us with a spirit of enthusiasm, that He will give us enthusiastic preachers and Sunday-school teachers, alive with the passion for righteousness—for the Kingdom of God and the salvation of men.

II

The second consideration is that such a life may bring trouble to the person who lives it. That is a commonplace observation, but it is a forcible fact. It *may* create enemies. It carries a dis-

turbing influence, and people do not like to be disturbed. Salt rubbed into a sore may cleanse it, but it is not soothing

Light streaming into the Church or the State may reveal some very unpleasant and ugly things. You shall scarcely find a reformer or a downright earnest Christian who has not been greatly disliked, and sometimes the hatred with which he has been regarded has been intense and virulent. Sooner or later there are collisions with vested interests or cherished abuses. There are still things that can be likened to hornet's nests, and they are discovered in unlikely quarters. They may be found among the Laodiceans, who as little as any men like to be disturbed. It is a startling reflection that a good deal of the bitter persecution of zealous Christians has sprung from organized religion. Our Lord is quite candid in His warning on this head: "They shall put you out of the synagogue." What does that mean? Excommunicated from the Church because of fidelity to Christ. "Yea, the time will come when he that killeth you will think that he doeth God service." Again, "A man's foes shall be they of his own household." And yet again, "Ye shall be hated of all men for My sake." We forget these things; we think that a good man is sure to be loved by those who live with him, that a good and faithful preacher must be popular, and that to be unpopular where you live implies that there must be something wrong with you. That is because we have misread history, or have not read it at all.

I know, of course, that things are different now. Christianity is popular now and honoured. Well, a sort of Christianity is, in certain quarters, but it is doubtful whether a zealous Christianity, a

Sermon on the Mount Christianity, insisting on justice and equity and the equal sharing of burdens, on unselfishness, on love of God and love of men, is popular.

It is a question whether persecutions have ceased; nay, it is scarcely a question whether the persecuting *spirit* has ceased. The rack and thumbscrew and stake are gone, much to the regret of some people, but there are methods of making life very troublesome—and, my dear friends, we are apt to keep our eye on the trouble, to be afraid of what will be said or thought if we do certain things.

The primary consideration often is not whether the thing is right, but what the people think about it in your office—your set, your little clique—or in other quarters, what society or the newspapers will say, whether your action will be sneered at or approved. I am afraid often, and you are, of somebody's temper, or somebody's alienation or enmity.

III

Now what does my text say? "Sanctify in your heart Christ as Lord." Enthrone Him as King. Let His will arbitrate and determine. You are sanctifying policy, expediency, in your heart as Lord. You want peace and pleasant relationships. You are enthroning popularity—really it means the enthronement of self. We are putting first the people who can help us or injure us. The first question a preacher is tempted to ask about a sermon is whether the people will like it, and parents whether their children will approve of a certain course. I am not saying that the question should not be asked, but it should not be asked first. If

our Christian life is to be anything but the merest form, Jesus Christ must be Lord, and the primary ambition must be to be accepted of Him. The first question must be, "Does He approve? Does He command?" We have to obey Him whether it means gain or loss, pain or pleasure, popularity or dislike. We are not at liberty to make peace with men at the price of fidelity to Him. Set Him over against the things that threaten. Learn fearless courage under the protection of His shield. Let no man's authority, however eminent he may be, compete with the authority of Christ. Believe that His "Well done" is worth more than all honour or gain or reward of men, and that without it there is no true peace. And since the voice of conscience is often the voice of Christ the Lord, never go against it. Dare to do the right; keep your eye fixed on that and on Christ who is the Lord of right. I verily believe that our Lord is wanting to-day, no less than in a former time, men and women who can suffer for His sake, who can walk the lonely and unpopular path with Him; and it is these people who are pronounced happy in the New Testament. Happy in their companionship; happy in His smile and happy in this, that more than others they bring His Kingdom nearer.

There, my brethren, is the path. God give us grace to walk in it; and if people ask us why we walk in it, be ready to give an answer even though they should jeer at it; say boldly yet with meekness, "I do it for His sake, and at His bidding, who is my Lord, to whom I belong, and to whom I owe my soul, my life, my all."

XI

THE MISSION OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified." —ISAIAH lxi. 1–3.

THIS is a great prophecy sent by the inspiration of God to an exiled and captive people. It is a part of the prophecy of their deliverance and restoration, and it is rare and wonderful in its beauty. Whenever we think of it, however, it is not in connection with its original application, but rather with a very memorable Sabbath in the Synagogue of Nazareth. There returned to that valley village One who had been brought up in its narrow and parochial life. An obscure person, reared in a peasant's cottage, He had sat among the common people of the village in the one place of worship Sabbath by Sabbath. He

had succeeded to the little business on the death of Joseph, and was known through the valley as the carpenter, who made and mended yokes and ploughs and other things. Of a sudden He had disappeared from the village, and rumours that He had become a religious teacher had spread abroad. Then He had returned, and when the Sabbath came He had gone to the familiar place of worship, surely now the observed of all observers. The prayers had been said, the creed recited, the lesson from the law read, and then He had stood up to take the place of the reader and speaker for the day, and this is the passage that He chose. Then while the music of the familiar and beautiful prophecy was in their ears, to their amazement He appropriated it to Himself, saying, "I am the man of whom the prophet spoke." Thus early in His ministry, quietly, as was His wont, our Lord made this startling claim. Already the consciousness of His stupendous mission was upon Him, and He chose to declare it to the men among whom He had formerly lived. The claim created a sensation that would never be forgotten by the Nazarenes, and it will ever be associated with these great words. It means two things: (1) that a great prophecy of Scripture is not exhausted by the occasion that calls it forth. Undoubtedly the first application of this passage was to the exiled and captive Jews in Babylon, but it no more applies to them exclusively than to the Jews who lived in Palestine 1900 years ago. It is of universal application, as all Scripture is and will be until the day when it is needed no more and we see Christ face to face. (2) The other thing is that the claim of Jesus Christ who clothes Himself with this prophecy is universal and perpetual.

Here is defined His mission in the days of His flesh. It is His mission still. *That* He was by the will of the Eternal God whose heart He reveals. That He is for all time, not to the Jewish nation, but to all the sorrowful and struggling children of men. I can pray for nothing better than that we may realize it to-day.

You see about whom He is thinking as He moves forth on His mission—which means, of course, about whom God is thinking. And when you read this programme over, pray do not think that Jesus Christ has no business with people who are not among these classes—the happy, the glad, and the free—and has no message to them. Rather think that He desires to make the sort of people mentioned here happy, glad, and free, and that the meaning of this passage and its appropriation by our Lord is that He comes to the people who need Him most, the people whom other strong and rich souls would shun and get away from or despise and scorn.

Do let us realize, to begin with, that our Lord is the friend of the poor, and the poor are the vast majority of mankind. And let us remember that the whole Bible is the friend of the poor, that the neglecter of the poor, the despiser of the poor, the person who lifts himself up in fancied superiority to the poor, and more especially the oppressor of the poor, is the man whom the Bible condemns. That therefore the Church that neglects or despises the poor is a Church upon whose life and labours the blessing of God can never rest. Let me remind you that the coming Redeemer of men, as pictured in great prophecies like the 72nd Psalm, is always the Friend and Saviour of the poor and needy. Nothing is more foreign to the

whole spirit of the Bible, nothing is more thoroughly condemned by it, than social pride—disrespect for the poor, scorn or neglect of the poor.

It would be impossible for any man to calculate all that Christianity has done for toiling and burdened and poor people. At any rate this may be stated, that they fare nowhere so well as in a land where the Christian faith prevails. Wherever that faith is accepted—really accepted and not merely professed—it invariably makes for the betterment of the poor. I do not speak merely of the sweet philanthropies that it sets in operation, but of this, that it cuts at the very roots of selfishness and pride which makes a man lift himself up in superiority to his brother men, or permits him to use them merely for his own benefit. Let the gospel have its way, and it is bound to create a greater equality among men, and to lead to a more equal sharing of the fruits of human enterprise.

But there is this also that is taught by the whole Bible, and more especially by the gospel of our Lord's lips and life. *Poverty does not dim the dignity of manhood.* It is a part of the gospel that needs to be tremendously emphasized in our suburban life, the truth expressed by Burns's line, "A man's a man for a' that." Our Lord refused to be rich; He elected to be poor. He carried His Divine dignity and refinement through life in a peasant's garb. Whoever despises poverty, therefore, would despise Him. His eyes run over the serried masses of struggling people, wearied with the desperate effort for daily bread, straitened in their means, anxious for to-morrow; whose lives have little variety, who cannot escape from mono-

tony, who never get to the mountains or the sea, who have to plan and scheme and struggle; and if He could come among us again He would range Himself on their side, not in social warfare but in closest sympathy. He would sternly rebuke those who ill-use and oppress them, and meanwhile He would declare to them that poverty must never rob them of dignity.

When you see a poor man refusing to part with his self-respect, refusing to cringe to wealth or power, daring to have his own convictions even against yours and to express them, do not be astonished or impatient, do not call him an upstart or grow angry at what you think is his presumption. He may possibly have learnt self-respect and the dignity of manhood at the feet of Jesus, the Carpenter of Nazareth. Few things are more unchristian than the stupid idea that clothes make the man—they sometimes make the mere ape, the imitator of greatness, the sham and shoddy person. From St. Paul to General Booth there have been great and princely souls who have elected to be poor, and who exemplify the fact that the poor may be the friends of Christ, that they may be rich in faith and great in character and may possess eternal treasure that can never pass away. Our Lord came to preach good tidings to the poor. They are never left out of His thought or regard.

But the ministry and mission of Christ is not confined to the poor or to any class. It is a mission to humanity, and especially to the neediest classes of men—and we proceed to consider them as they are named here—not from the point of view of this prophet, but from the point of view of our Lord.

The broken-hearted. Do not think that they do not exist. When we are young and strong and happy, we object to people—as I remember objecting to them—who insist on calling this world a vale of tears. But it *is* that to a great many people. And there are those into whose life such happenings have come that they feel it can never be anything else. That is a profound mistake. It can be changed. The valley of weeping may become a place of springs, the Valley of Achor a door of hope; but there is no mistake about the valley for the moment. Tennyson says,

> "Never morning wore
> To evening, but some heart did break."

And broken-hearted people do not all die. There are "Hearts that break and brokenly live on." Cheated in hope, betrayed in love, disappointed in purpose, broken in fortune, bereft of sympathy and friendship, they cry for death and it comes not. And it is one of the most precious facts of the gospel that it was in great part the sorrow of the world, its seemingly incurable sorrow, that brought Christ into the world. God had the sorrow of the world on His heart, and sent His only begotten Son to heal it. "*He* hath sent *Me*"—it is one of the specific parts of the commission—"to bind up the broken-hearted." And He has been doing it through the ages. The Christ who died of a broken heart can cure broken-hearted men.

They are not all in cottages and tenements. There is probably as much mirth and light-heartedness there as anywhere. They are in palaces and mansions, in stately residences and villas, in

garden cities and spacious homes, and they are the people whose sorrows Christ feels and whom He seeks that He may comfort them. There is nothing more certain than that Christ our Lord has a mission to sorrowful people, and that He has something to say to your specific trial. Beauty for ashes, the oil of joy and the garment of praise are His gifts to the mourning soul.

The other people are *the captives and the bound.* It means, speaking generally, people who have lost their freedom and are no longer their own masters. They may be slaves or prisoners; they may be simply captives carried into exile.

It will be seen by comparing Luke's narrative with this that there is a difference. There "the recovering of sight to the blind" is declared to be a part of the mission of Christ. It is quoted from the Septuagint version of the Old Testament Scriptures, and one translation of the last phrase of the first verse of this chapter is "To open the eyes of them that are bound." It is well to keep these sentences in mind as we consider the passage.

One great thing that Israel needed in its captivity, and that men need in every sort of captivity, is the opening of the eyes. It is often the preliminary to the opening of the prison and the breaking of the fetters. To see the cause of the captivity, to see the reason for it, to see, perhaps, the needlessness of it, may be a great step towards the ending of the captivity. Enlightenment leads to liberty. Open the eyes of men who are bound by cruel and degrading superstitions, and they will break the bonds of their superstition. Enlighten the serf, educate him, and the natural outcome will be that he refuses to remain

a serf. Open men's eyes to the reality and the meaning and the consequence of some ruinous moral bondage, and there is the beginning of liberty. Of all things that might be questioned in the ministry of Christianity—it could scarcely be questioned even by its severest critic—that it had made for the freeing of men. You may be quite literal, and say that our Lord has broken the fetters of the slave. It is impossible ultimately for slavery to exist where the gospel of Christ is really believed. And while one cannot deny that superstitions have sprung up in the path of the Christian Church, or have been taken over by it from pagan religions, it is still quite certain that the gospel has broken the spell of evil superstitions and put them to flight. Wherever the true Christian faith is accepted—not caricatures of it which keep men back in bondage—it invariably makes for freedom. And that is most of all true in the moral realm. Who are the moral captives and prisoners? The servants of pleasure, of appetite and passion, the slaves of some degrading habit. Or the slaves of conventionality and custom. And *where* are they? Everywhere—some of them here.

And it is a great thing for a man to *know* that he is a prisoner. When our Lord talked to some people in Jerusalem about the possibility of being made free, they exclaimed indignantly that they were Abraham's seed and had never been in bondage. It is a pathetic thing when a man does not know that he is a slave; when he is being duped and exploited and used by greedy and selfish persons, and does not know it; when he thinks his tyrants are his friends; when he hugs his chains and clings to the low pleasures of his cap-

tivity; when he hugs laziness and self-indulgence and the things that bind the soul in narrowing chains. It is a great thing when a man's eyes are opened to the FACT of his captivity.

And it is a still greater thing when he sees that the captivity need not last.

Do you know what I am talking about? About a man's eyes being opened to the fact that he is a fool, that his life is being spoilt and ruined by avarice, or lust, or indolence, or selfishness, or some humiliating sin. And then this message comes to him, "Sin shall not have dominion over you; your condition is not hopeless. It is precisely with such people as you that Jesus Christ has business. It was for the sake of such as you that He came. It was of such as you that He was thinking when He quoted and appropriated this great Scripture. And there is no need to despair. There is freedom, perfect and complete. It is to be found in the commitment of life to Him"—

> "He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
> He sets the captive free."

It is not a theory but a fact. He came to do it, has been doing it, for 1900 years, and can do it here and now.

But there are some of you who do not feel that you come into this category at all. You are not poor, you often thank God for that; and you are not broken-hearted! and you are not a captive or slave to anything. What then? Why this: Christ would fain use you to help to carry out His programme. I speak with solemn conviction when I declare that He cannot fully carry out His mission apart from men. And, further, let me affirm that

this is what we are here for, and that we can only truly help our Lord as we give ourselves to Him. You can only have power in this dark world to lighten it, and power in this bound world to make it free, as you are able to say with Him, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me." And the Spirit comes to the surrendered and obedient soul. I believe that the truly self-dedicated man, dedicated to Christ, shares His anointing.

Anybody who looks closely at human life will see a vast amount of almost hopeless poverty. He will see also a great army of sorrowful people doomed to suffer disappointment and trouble, each carrying his own burden. He will see also any number of slaves and victims: people who are mastered by wrong things. And if it were given him to see all the facts, he would see over against all these the mighty and pitiful Christ carrying all these things upon His heart, and crying out for some who would share the burden with Him.

And I think he would see also this sad sight: a number of people hastening away from it all, so thoroughly bent on their own pleasure and ease and gain that they had no eyes and no heart for all the need and sadness of the world.

And to them Jesus Christ would cry—the young, the healthy, the light-hearted, the prosperous—"Is it nothing to you, O ye that pass by? Will you not help Me to heal the sores of men? Will you not give yourself to Me and to My work in the world? Will you not help to set men free, to comfort their sorrows, to dry their scalding tears, to lighten their burdens?" My brethren, I feel sure that call comes to some of us. We may not feel our need of Christ, although we do need

Him, and any appeal on that side might not touch us. But it is certain that Christ needs you, and calls for you and calls to you—the bright, the privileged, the clever, the capable, the gifted—as truly as He called Peter and John and the Young Ruler and Paul.

There are two ways opening before us all: the one is the way of self-pleasing; the other is the way of obedience to Christ and service of others for His sake. And the question of all questions is, Which will you take? The call of Christ appeals to the heroic in you. It is a call to the giving of yourself, to sacrifice and to service; but it is the call also to a truly great and noble life. Strange as it may seem to some people, it is also the way to present joy. To all eternity the man is blessed who obeys the call of Christ.

It is a thousand times better to die like General Booth—with practically no possessions, with a great life of service behind him, to bless him with its memories throughout eternity—than to die a mere millionaire, who has simply gathered that which has no currency in the life beyond. And you may know of a certainty which has the keener and purer joy. To make us fellow-workers with Himself our Lord calls us. May we have the wisdom and the willingness to accept His call.

XII

MISSION AND AGENT

"To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me."—Acts xxvi. 18.

THIS is a part of the commission put into the trembing hand of St. Paul in the great crisis and revolution of his life. This is what, as his marvellous ministry went on, it became clearer and surer to him that the Lord who had intercepted and melted and won him meant him to do. The beginning of the paragraph in which the text occurs is, "To this end have I appeared unto thee," to send thee to the people and the Gentiles, to open their eyes, etc. At once the lessons from the marvellous incident began to appeal to us. In the soul of it, though not in the dramatic manner of it, St. Paul's conversion is typical and illustrative. It is for our instruction. Watch the points in it. "*Rise and stand upon thy feet*," that is the first thing. You are not converted that you may go mourning all your days, weeping rivers of tears and performing acts of torturing penance in memory of and atonement for your past transgressions. Do not waste your emotion in that way.

Set it to work. Let the memory of God's amazing grace impel you to grateful and loving service. Not to crush you does the glorified Christ appear to you; not to make you a sad-eyed and morbid penitent; but to raise you up and fill you with joy and strength. "Arise and stand upon thy feet, for to this end have I appeared unto thee." And beyond that there is not a word in the commission about Paul himself, nothing about the fate from which he has been snatched, or the heaven to which he is going, or his own soul, or his own bliss. It is all about other people, which means that when God calls him, or any other person, He looks far beyond the man himself. And He converts the man for the sake of others—his children, his workpeople, his colleagues, his neighbours, or the poor, the sad, or the young, or the intellectual, or the ignorant, or the people far away. Far beyond your poor soul the Lord looked when He called you to Himself. He had others in view, and His power has been largely wasted on you if you have not made use of it.

"To this end have I appeared unto thee, to make thee a minister and a witness." Positive then and not negative was Christ's purpose in Paul's conversion. Not that a mischievous and destructive influence might be removed out of the path, and the Churches might have rest from persecution (the Churches had very little rest under him at any time), but that a great instrument for positive good might be secured and engaged. And it is simple truth to add that Paul from the first accepted the position. The sword and spear of his life were not destroyed, they were converted into the ploughshare and the pruning-hook. He not only ceased to destroy in the Lord's great

field; he diligently and intensely cultivated it. He always proceeded on the assumption that what had happened to him on the way to Damascus might happen to any man whom he met, and that it was his business, and his supreme business, to try to get it to happen. For that very purpose it had happened to him. He had been saved that he might by any means save others. And again let it be said that what was true of him is equally true of all who are brought under the sway of Christ to-day.

We come inevitably to this, therefore, that there is set before us the mission of the Church in the world to-day, and it needs no words of mine to indicate and emphasize its importance and grandeur. You have only to read the verse slowly and carefully to feel the glory and the greatness of the calling of the servant of Christ. To open men's eyes. To illumine, to liberate, to cleanse, and to consecrate human life, to array it in all the beauty of holiness. That is the passion of the living Christ; that is the business on which He would set His Church. Nay, that is the thing that He would do in the world through the agency and instrumentality of the Church which is His body.

You will realize at the very beginning that this is the precise purpose for which He came. In the first sentence of this commission you have a part of the burden of prophecy concerning the coming of the Desire of all nations. Let me recall to your minds one or two of the sweet strains of ancient prophecy which Handel, with unerring instinct, has embodied in his great oratorio.

"Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened." "The people that walked in darkness have seen a

great light, and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death upon them hath the light shined." I call to your mind the song of Zachariah, an echo of this prophecy: "To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." I call to your mind again the memorable Sabbath day in Nazareth when He returned to it who had been brought up in its narrow streets, and in its little synagogue read and appropriated to Himself the great prophecy outlining His own mission, included in which were the opening of the prison to them that were bound and the recovery of sight to the blind.

I do not think anybody will question the implication of the teaching of Scripture, both of the Old and the New Testament, that it was to a blinded and darkened world that our Lord came, and it was into a blinded and darkened world that He sent His Apostles, including this last-to-be-chosen. It is not complimentary to human nature, but is it not true that men are very largely blind? You know, brethren, the grace and tenderness of the Lord Jesus, and you know what He said concerning even the religious leaders of His day and land. Here is how He described them and those who were led by them: "They are blind leaders of the blind." And this is what St. Paul said: "The God of this world hath blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

Do you not think that is awfully true of people? That many of them are quite blind to the value and even the reality of spiritual things, spiritual exercises and fellowships, and pleasures?

I ask questions at this point. I do not make dogmatic statements. Do you not think that men are fearfully deluded as to what constitutes true happiness and joy? Do we not suffer from a chronic delusion that has been exposed and exploded over and over, that these things are found in large possessions? Are not people about us blind to the sweet and unalloyed joy of purity? Do you not think that they are utterly blind to the glory of the Bible and to the unspeakable privilege of prayer? May you not frequently meet with people who are entirely and sarcastically sceptical about the joy of self-denial and the blessedness of giving? Would I not be within the region of simple fact if I declared that there are multitudes to-day suffering from entire misapprehension concerning religion—either as to its vital nature or as to its ever being capable of leading people into joy and gladness of heart, blind to what the Bible calls the beauty of holiness, people to whom the whole thing is shrouded in gloom? And are there not men who are blinded to the real character of God, to the glory of His goodness and His love, fleeing from His face, shutting their ears to the music of His call, making haste to forget Him, blind to their highest interests, living without the enjoyment of Divine help and comfort, in blank unconsciousness and indifference as to the very existence of God?

What is it that blinds people? Passion sometimes and prejudice, and self-will, and money, and pleasure, and sin. Our Lord says, "The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things entering in choke the word." It is something else that dazzles or blinds

the eye to the true values and realities of life. And trouble—the cloud and burden of trouble; the blinding tears of sorrow hide from men the great soul-saving and heart-comforting facts.

And perhaps the worst kind of blindness that can afflict human nature is the blindness of people whom God has blessed with great temporal blessings to the sorrows and miseries, the struggles and sufferings, the unrelieved sadness and gloom of other lives, and the claims of God upon themselves. Blind eyes, numbed consciences, and hard hearts are among the saddest things.

And it is into a blinded and darkened world, and sometimes into a blinded and darkened Church, that our Lord comes and that He would send His heralds and messengers. I quote St. Paul again on his commission: "That I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and *that I should make men see.*" *There* seems to have been the business of his life, to make men see. See what? Let me quote him again, "Having the eyes of your heart enlightened that ye may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of His power to you ward who believe." So he is always trying to make men see, to carry light into dark places, and to open men's eyes to see the light that is streaming around them. And often he succeeds, so that he can say to a whole company of people whose eyes have been opened, "Ye were once darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord."

And sometimes he failed. Notably, for example, in this chapter. It is obvious that, according to his wont with every man, he is trying to make

Herod Agrippa see. He is reasoning, arguing, and persuading from the Old Testament in which Agrippa is supposed to believe to the Christ in whom he does not believe, and he is beginning to succeed. The light of truth seems to be piercing the darkened eyes of the man's heart. It begins to trouble him, and Agrippa stops the operation. He prefers not to see. He does not want to be persuaded. To become a Christian would be too terrible. There are plenty of people *who do not want to see.* To a diseased eye the light is torture, and to a selfish and perverted soul the truth is agony. There is the tragedy of the soul. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light." That was the trouble of the Lord in the days of His flesh. It is His trouble still. There are people who shut their eyes and who are wilfully blind. They do not want knowledge that would disturb them in ease, self-indulgence, and sin. *They do not want to know what their pleasures and amusements cost other people,* what it costs to earn their dividends; the bare, ugly facts of the underside, the seamy side, of our industrial and social life; the shames and sorrows of the heathen world. I repeat again that God's great trouble with men is that they do not want to know—and we may be among the number. Wilful ignorance is one of the great sins of human life, and its ultimate consequence is that we come to doubt and even to deny the existence of things which we refuse to see.

And now, finally, on the strength of this narrative, *who are the people who are gifted with the power to* open men's eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan

unto God? I do not go on to say and to bestow forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified. You will observe that that is not a part of Paul's commission. It is a great power with which he is endowed, but it does not reach to *that*. They are *to receive* forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified, but that is by faith in Christ. Apparently it is nowhere claimed by Paul.

But, judging from him, you see who are the people qualified to open men's eyes, etc.? They are the people who have passed through the process themselves, whose own eyes have been opened as Paul's had been; who have seen and felt the hideousness of sin, the glory of goodness, who have seen and felt the miseries of men. I mean that a man's heart must feel and perhaps bleed for the woes of others, if he would help to heal them. For, my brethren, we may be certain of this, that the whole of our Lord's works of healing, whether of the bodies or the souls of men, were the outcome and expression of His sympathy and His compassion, as expressed in the words of Matthew's Gospel: "Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses." You must feel with human sorrow if you are ever to heal it.

But there is more than that. A man must have experienced regeneration if he is to preach it with power. It must not be a theory with him but an experience. "I have appeared unto thee to make thee a minister and a *witness*." And there must still be something more if man or Church is to carry on this illuminating and saving ministry. There must be constant, intimate, and vital contact with Christ. It is His power after all; and

I am speaking of that which is simple fact and not pulpit rhetoric when I say that there may be such vital contact between the soul of man and Christ that His power to illumine and save may flow through an individual and a community. His sympathy may be expressed to-day by human lips and hands.

Do you remember what happened after the days of the Lord's flesh were ended on earth and the days of His Spirit had begun—how a lame man was healed, and the Apostles declared that it was by the risen Christ and by no power or holiness of their own? And do you remember the picture immediately following of Peter standing over a sick man, who had been helpless for eight years, and saying simply, yet it must have been with tremendous faith and assurance, "Æneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole"?

Oh, my friends, it is not money, nor eloquence, nor cleverness, nor organization that are going to illumine and sweeten and save and free and sanctify human life, but these things, and the persons who possess them, consecrated, yielded up to Christ, switched on to His divine power. It is perfectly useless for me to preach and for all the machinery of the Church to be kept going, save as my life is given up to the sanctifying energy of the Spirit of God. I believe that we have in this verse the programme of the Church's mission, and that the Church is absolutely helpless to carry it through save as it is kept in fellowship with the living Christ. The utmost that we can do is to reflect as a mirror His glory, to be the channel and medium of His light and His saving grace. Here it is in unforgettable words of guidance: "He that abideth in Me and I in him,

the same bringeth forth much fruit, for apart from Me ye can do nothing." And here are the words of experience: "I no longer live, Christ liveth in me," and "I am strong for all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." To-day is the day for us to face the intention and the demand of our Lord. Here is what He would have us to do, and, feeling the vastness and the blessedness of the enterprise, to yield ourselves to Him once again, to return to Him, the source of cleansing and of power. To ask that to us may be given the blessed privilege of being used of Him to—

> "Have power in this dark world to lighten it,
> And power on this dead world to make it live,
> And power over this bound world to make it free."

And thus with humble and rejoicing heart, knowing that all power is of Him, to go forth to help Him to win the world to God.

XIII

QUERULOUS DOUBT AND ITS CURE

"There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? Lord, lift thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.

Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased.

I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep."—PSALM iv. 6–8.

WE begin with a question old and yet ever new. Many were murmuring it sadly or asking it eagerly three thousand years ago. So they are to-day. Where is good to be found? *Is* it to be found? "Good" means that which brings peace, rest, satisfaction, gladness, delight. Man believes he was made to have these, and he sadly knows that they are not his permanent and stable possession. So he goes everywhere seeking them, and comes back wearied and discouraged, and sometimes cynical, from the quest. The question of the text is the cry of the hungry heart of humanity, and its continual repetition creates the markets of the world. A perfectly bewildering variety of wares is spread before the hungry mind and soul and body of man. A multitude of counsellors and physicians undertake to direct the hope or to heal the despair of the

questioners. You want good, heart's-ease, peace, happiness. You will find them in work or pleasure, in love and marriage, in friendship and home, or in money and fame and success, or in knowledge and virtue, or in the service of men. Part of the difficulty lies here with many people: they cannot secure some of these things. Life is a solitary and barren desert to them. Friendship and love, marriage and home, money and fame, and even congenial work, have been denied them. There are many thousands of people in London who have no home—though they may have some place, more or less wretched, to eat and sleep in—and no friends, and no success, no welcoming smile of love and sympathy. Unhonoured and unappreciated they perform an ill-remunerated task, and for their best efforts there is no word of praise.

There is a vast crowd that might cry, "What is there for *us* who are denied the sweet and precious things of life, the leisure and pleasure and treasure of the world? Who will show *us* good?" I believe that some people are driven into sin by the dreary monotony of life, and that their very vices are an expression of their hunger for some satisfying delight. Again, there are people who have had some of these things and lost them. They constitute an Eden from which they have been driven out, as David was driven from his palace and the city which he had created, by the wickedness of Absalom. So there are people who have had a home, and it has been taken from them; and love, and have lost it. There are people who have been driven from abundance to want, from honour to contempt. There are those who have lost friendship and the favour of men, and there are those who have

lost virtue and self-respect. Their good is gone beyond recall; what is left for them?

Go further, and you will be bound to admit that there are people who have suceeeded in gaining and keeping some of the things named and have not found the good in them that they promised. You have only to observe human life carefully, to read the revelations of it that appear too often in the columns of the newspapers, to see how much of the promise of life proves to be

> "Dead Sea fruit that tempts the eye,
> And turns to ashes on the lip."

It would be sad and simple truth to say that there are crowds of people whose work brings them little satisfaction or joy. On the contrary, it is irksome and disappointing, and sometimes a daily exasperation. Even in the highest work a man may feel that he is pouring water into a sieve, building a castle of sand. It was a great and noble heart that cried, "I have laboured in vain and spent my strength for nought." There are those who try to reach people and influence them aright, and in the midst of crumbling hopes and defeated plans they cry, "We do not know what to be at. Who will show us good?" Do you not think you could find people who have been disappointed in their children, as Jacob was and David; whose fond early hopes have been rudely dispelled, and who question whether there is any return for the toil and self-denial and sacrifice, inseparable from the bringing up of children? And you can scarcely doubt that there are abundant instances in which relationships which ought to have been the sweetest and dearest have been

somehow poisoned, and have become a bitter and galling bondage. So the question comes to be asked sceptically by people who seem to be mocked by a cruel fate.

You know such people—people who have known little peace or rest for a long span of troubled years. Trouble at home, trouble in their business. Do you not run up against people who have gone clean over into pessimism and are just floundering along in that awful bog? People who think the whole world is hopelessly wrong, framed on a wrong principle, a huge mistake; human life a mirage. People for whom the sun never shines and the east wind is always blowing; who rail on the universe, and look on love and marriage, on the home and the Church and religion, as delusions; and who hold by the old pagan creed, that you should call no man happy till he is dead; who have lost faith in God and in man.

Now where do these people come from, and how are they produced, and what is to be done with them?

Sometimes they are people who have blundered with life all along. They have been governed by impulse or passion or self-will, and not by wisdom. They have scorned warning and despised advice. They have exercised neither foresight nor reason. It is not difficult at this time of day, *e.g.*, to account for the trouble in David's family. It can be traced very largely to David's folly in that matter. We enter upon courses rashly and stubbornly that are foolish, and expect to reap the harvest of wisdom.

You know people to-day who stubbornly refuse to be moved from a way that is certain to lead to unhappiness and disappointment, and you know

that when these come they will bitterly complain of their misfortunes. You know that people are preparing a rod for their own backs, and by and by when the rod falls everybody will be at fault but themselves, and you who advised them will probably be envied or blamed most of all.

Then again we expect far too much from the things that have the possibility of good in them. We form exaggerated ideas of the power of the things we long for, to confer happiness upon us. We refuse to see their limitations and to see that man is too big in his nature to be satisfied with any or even all of them. I am quite sure that we are apt to expect too much from each other and to forget that the frailty and imperfection of human nature is a great and solid fact. Parents expect too much from children and children from parents, ministers from Churches and Churches from ministers, and many people from the world and from life in general. We fail to see, moreover, that what satisfies one man will not bring peace to another; it may be torture to him rather.

We start life with a wrong conception, or we get it as we go along. We will not lay our reckoning with disappointment and loss and pain and death, which however great their mystery are an inevitable accompaniment of human life. And most of all we fail to see that the Christian conception of life is that we are here not mainly to get but to give; that self-centred living inevitably lays a man open to disappointment; that our chief attitude should not be that of expectancy, but of service, and the chief question not, What shall I have? but, What shall I render? That indeed we are mainly debtors and not creditors; that the first emphasis is not to be laid on rights

but on duties. There is surely some relief of the mystery along these lines.

Further, let us realize that the mood sceptical and despondent in which this question is often asked, as well as that which causes the mood, may be quite temporary both in ourselves and others. *There are sicknesses of the soul* as well as of the body. They come and pass; and I believe that the most devout and believing soul may swing for a period into the gloom of scepticism and atheism. He may be blinded by his tears, and hope may be temporarily crushed and the judgment warped by the burden of disappointment and sorrow. You would never think of asking a seasick passenger crossing the Atlantic or the North Sea his views on the universe. You must wait till he arrives at New York or at Christiania, until you see him exploring the wonders of the fjords of Norway, or watching the signs of eager enterprise in the New World, before you can get from him a sound and reliable judgment. He might possibly tell you then that the fascinating interest of the scenes through which he is passing are worth over and over even the loathsome experiences through which he has had to go. And after all, under certain physical conditions in him, the very voyage might have been an unalloyed delight. I would suggest on the strength of this illustration that the seat of disorder may sometimes be in us and not in our circumstances; that it is not the world that is wrong, or the people about us, but ourselves; that there are many glorious things noble and right if we had but the capacity to see and admire them. And further, that there may be something on beyond that by its glory will infinitely more than compensate for our present

distress. Listen to a man who knew; whom the world treated as badly as it ever treated any man, who gave his all ungrudgingly and got nothing in return: "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us." And again, "These light afflictions" (who but he would have called them light?), "which are but for a moment, work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." My brethren, I am quite sure that the Psalmist shows us the way to act when these sceptical moods are on us and these sceptical voices are in our ears. He takes refuge in prayer. He cries for light, the light of God's countenance; and his prayer seems to be answered.

It is the wise course and often the only way of escape. We are all of us affected by the judgment and opinion of people about us. It streams on us from the newspapers or the talk of an office like rain, or it rises about us like the chill mists of winter, and it affects us. Clearness of vision is apt to be blurred and judgment warped. Difficulties are suggested of which we had never dreamed. One solitary aspect of things is set before us which is not true because it is one-sided, and the things that counterbalance it are kept out of sight.

"A truth that is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies."

I remember early in my ministry, when one was inclined to look at things with the optimism of youth and to credit his own people with more virtues, perhaps, than they actually possessed, being visited by two older men, disappointed and cynical both of them, who deemed it their duty to

point out the defects of my people, of which I had been unconscious—what they had left undone, what they had done that they ought not to have done; how much better circumstanced some of them were than their minister, how worldly some were and how mean others. And I remember to this day the chilling and unsettling effect of these conversations at first, and the thing that saved the situation was that scarcely one person escaped censure. The picture was overdrawn; there was not a redeeming feature in it. Wellnigh everybody and everything was hopeless, and I was driven to the conclusion that the defect was not in the landscape but in the painter. He had no eyes for the beautiful spots, and I had seen them and knew that they were there.

But how difficult it is when men about you suggest doubt of God's reality and of His goodness and love; when what looks like proof against these things is adduced; when the wrongs and sufferings, the griefs and injustices, of men are paraded before you and you feel the reality of them all. What shall we do to keep from yielding to the pressure? Well, we know that this is not the whole of the truth. There is another side, and we may know it. Meanwhile I earnestly suggest that we should allow the Psalmist to show us the way. He takes these voices and his own perplexities to God with the prayer, "Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance." What is the light of God's countenance? Why, the consciousness of the reality of God to begin with, that greatest fact of human life; and then the revelation of *what* He is. The countenance is the revelation of the character and the intention, of the heart and soul. The light of God's counte-

nance mean's God's presence and protection, His fellowship and favour and loving-kindness. The light of God's countenance is the light of truth, the clearing of mists and revealing of facts. Cowper says—

> "Sometimes a light surprises
> The Christian while he sings."

He might more truthfully say, while he prays. A spiritual revelation given while you pray may remove or relieve the pressure of an intellectual difficulty. "I was envious at the foolish when I saw the prosperity of the wicked . . . till I went into the sanctuary of God, then understood I." And the sanctuary of God is the place of prayer, and it is there that the light often breaks and shines and the mists melt away.

If we place this Psalm where Ewald places it, viz., at the time of Absalom's rebellion, its force is considerably augmented. Think of the situation for a moment: the father in flight from his son, who has usurped his throne and occupied his palace; his people falling away from him in panic or treachery, his own life gravely imperilled, the curses of Shimei in his ears, his faithful followers depressed and despondent. Could there be any good in such a situation? And it is there that David prays, and that his prayer is answered, and he finds light and refuge and sustaining grace and peace in the lifting up of the light of God's countenance.

That is the light in which to see things; not through the mist and gloom of pessimism nor in the fancy and coloured glare of a shallow optimism, but in the light of God's eternal goodness and in the light of His power. There you

see things not only as they are, which is a great advantage, but as they will become—that is, as they are in God's purpose; what He intends them to be. In that light also we are able to determine and define what "good" is; the real nature and the precise value of outward good; what it can do, what it can never do; to see that a man may possess all of it and fail of satisfaction and peace; that he may be stripped bare of it, and yet have a peace that passeth understanding. In that light a man will also see that all outward good is temporary and exhaustible. It inevitably passes, and the stream dries up.

Dear friends, we have a far better opportunity of seeing things in the light of God's countenance than the Psalmist had. That light has been lifted upon the world in Jesus Christ our Lord as never prophet or Psalmist saw it. God's name and nature, His character and purpose, are revealed clearly in the gospel. Let us see to it that David does not put us to shame by his clearer vision of the loving-kindness of God. Let him point us to the source of relief. Listen to his assurance (verse 3): "The Lord will hear when I call unto Him." Then listen to his call in verse 6. Then see that in the next verse the answer has come: "Thou hast put gladness in my heart." Corn and wine were gone, abundance had ceased; adversity had come; misfortunes and calamities followed fast one upon the heels of another; but he had that which was far sweeter and richer than any outward good. It was the light of God's countenance, the assurance of His accompanying presence and protecting love. And these were enough. From querulous doubts of men, from slander and spite, from his own wild alarms, he took refuge in

these, as he said: "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep."

And there is our lesson, who have so much clearer light than he had. We are all disposed to attach far too great importance to corn and wine —that is, to outward good—and far too little to the consciousness of God. Perhaps it is partly because we have much more experience of the former than the latter. Perhaps the one is a solid fact and the other but a pretty theory. If it be so, it is surely because we have not received or walked in the light that God has sent—the light of the gospel. The man who does that will not despise outward good. He will see that there are things that it can do, and he will rejoice in it if it be his. But he will also see that its powers are severely limited, and to the question, "Who will show us good?" permanent and adequate, there is but one answer. If the truth were told, each of the things in which men commonly trust would say, "It is not in me." And the final answer is: "It is not in things at all. It is in God." Not the God of men's imagining, but the God who was in Christ, in His goodness and love, His pity and power. From Him we came, to Him we return. In Him we find life. Let a man live to do His will, and his soul shall be satisfied. For nothing is truer than the word of another Psalmist: "*He* satisfieth the longing soul and filleth the hungry soul with goodness."

XIV

THE HELPLESS CHRIST

"If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross."—MATTHEW xxvii. 40.

YOU will recognize at once the similarity that unites these words with the words spoken to our Lord at the temptation in the wilderness: "If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." And the unmistakable implication of the very form of the speech is, "If you do not command the stones to be made bread, and if you do not come down from the cross, you are not the Son of God." For why should the Son of God be afflicted with the pangs of hunger, and why, still more, should He endure all the horrors of the cross?

You will observe the source from which the word comes in the first instance. It was the devil who first said, "If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." You may affirm with absolute certainty that the word here proceeds from the same source. The devil can speak through the lips of men, even of priests and rulers. If we are to trust this record, we must believe that he can speak through the lips, for the time being, of an Apostle. When our Lord first announced

plainly to His disciples the necessity for the Cross, we read that Simon Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "That be far from Thee, Lord; this shall never be unto Thee." Then He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan." I read farther on still that the *devil entered into Judas.* So it would seem that a man who is in the company of Jesus needs to beware lest he become a channel of diabolical sentiments and a medium of temptation to others. There is nothing more certain than that anti-Christian sentiments can be uttered from Christian pulpits, and that the same sentiments may prevail in a community that is called Christian. It has happened before now that a Church has been the abode of bitterness, envy, and malice, and all uncharitableness, and has breathed these forth from its pulpit. And they are all devilish, and not one of them is of God. We all need to watch our hearts and our lips lest such spirit possess us and such words escape from us.

Not only is there a similarity between the words of the text and the words of the temptation in the wilderness, but no one can look on the scene described in these verses round about my text without feeling how truly diabolical it is. It is an awful revelation of the lengths to which religious jealousy and bigotry will lead men; nay, rather to what depths of hideous malignity and depravity of hate and cruelty.

There is something positively fiendish in the glee with which these men mock the sufferings of the silent Christ upon the cross. Even if our Lord had been as bad as they tried to believe and as they affirmed, their conduct would have still been shocking and revolting. To exult in the sufferings

even of the very worst, and to mock and taunt in his sufferings, is so entirely removed from the Christian spirit that it may be truthfully termed devilish. The murderous spite and malice of the chief priests and scribes and elders who mock the suffering Christ on the cross are a startling revelation of the depths of wickedness into which men can sink.

I have not, however, to preach about that. I have rather to call your attention to the sentiment and substance of the taunts which they flung in the face of the august and holy Sufferer. "If He be the Son of God, He will come down. If He be the King of Israel, let Him come down and we will believe. If He saved others, He can surely save Himself." And because He does none of these, because He does not escape from the hands into which their treachery and false swearing have placed Him, He is not what He professed to be. If God does not deliver Him now it can only be that He has no delight in Him. That is the sentiment uttered in wicked, malignant spite about the cross of Calvary.

The question is whether the same sentiment is not held by people who are not the enemies of Christ; whether, indeed, if one had searched the mind and heart of the disciples and Apostles of the Lord he would not have found it lurking there. I think he would. It was surely the thought expressed in Simon Peter's remonstrance. It could never be that the Christ, the Son of the living God, as he had just confessed Him, should submit to suffering and be allowed to suffer. And everybody who reads the gospel narrative can see that the fact of the suffering and the death of our Lord bewildered the Apostles and dealt a shattering

blow at their faith and confidence in their Master. One of the theories explanatory of the treachery of Judas is that he believed that his Master would by miraculous power deliver Himself from the clutches of His enemies; and that He allowed Himself to be taken and mocked and scourged without resistance was a bewildering and an insoluble mystery to the Apostles.

Apart from the anger and the brutal malice, it might almost be said that they caught the spirit of the murderers of their Master. Why should He submit? Why should He allow the triumph of His foes? Why, by some striking and dramatic act, did He not vindicate Himself? Was not the fact that He did not do so a proof that He was not what they had thought Him, that He was no more divine than the rest of men? The language of the two men on the walk to Emmaus seems to bear that out. Their faith is all in the past tense: "We *trusted* that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel," and the implication of that word is that they trusted no longer. The Son of Man came back from the grave and found no faith on the earth. His sufferings and death had been the suffering and the death of the faith of His friends.

Now one wonders whether we have got beyond the sentiment!

Are we not pained and puzzled when righteous people are made to suffer, when good people are stricken down with misfortune or affliction? Are we not continually oppressed by what we call the mystery of it? Why does not God hear prayer? Why does He not deliver from pain? Why does He not spare some precious life? Why does the *Titanic* go down? etc.

Have we not some sort of theory that it pays

to be righteous, that the way of obedience to the will of God means a pleasant path; and when the contrary happens, does not your faith weaken and sometimes reel under the strain? And are there not people who set about explaining the mystery? Either they say there is no God, or He would never allow people to suffer as they do. Or else under other circumstances we say these people are not good; they only seem to be. We fall back on the ancient philosophy of Job's friends, and say that when a man suffers there must be some secret wrong in his life.

Had we not a saying in our boyish games which expressed the belief in which we had been trained, that cheats never prosper? and yet they often did prosper. Were we not brought up in the belief that righteousness was sure to succeed and that honesty was the best policy? And yet events occasionally went to show that righteousness sometimes failed, and honesty occasionally got people into disastrous trouble. Was not the teaching wrong? Should it not have been that cheating, however it might succeed, is a despicable and loathsome business, which is branded with God's displeasure, and which degrades and ruins the soul? And that honesty and righteousness are eternally noble and beautiful—so noble and beautiful and producing such inward peace that they are worth any amount of suffering?

I would not pretend for a moment that there is not a deep mystery here, nor would I pretend that I can solve it. But at least let it be affirmed that the Bible nowhere teaches that righteousness shall not suffer. Religion is nowhere in the Bible a vast insurance society in which, if a man pays premiums of offerings and beliefs, he shall find

shelter from the sufferings that ordinary humanity endures. Nowhere is God represented as bribing men into His service by rewards of material prosperity and immunity from pain and adversity. Certainly our Lord never made such an offer to men. And most certainly His apostles had no such reward. Their service to Him, their honest fidelity to Him, from a worldly point of view, was the worst policy. It brought them hardship, suffering, misfortune, and persecution which they might otherwise have escaped. And their teaching was, "Through much tribulation"—not through ease and comfort—the Kingdom of God must be entered.

Why, surely the problem of the suffering of goodness that vexes many minds is concentrated and accentuated in the case of our Lord. You may think for a moment of the solemn scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. What would you say of one in an agony of soul too deep for utterance crying to be delivered, and no deliverance coming, of all the horror and shame of the cross intensified by the malignant mocking of coarse and brutal men, until the sufferer cries, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" If you had been present with your belief in the doctrine of a God of tender mercy who hears prayer and who delivers the needy when he crieth, would you not have been blinded by the mystery? Have you not, in the experience of our Lord, precisely those things which to-day make men doubt and even deny God? Is it not the spirit expressed here, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross"?

But is not the real fact here, after all, that because He is the Son of God He cannot come down from the cross, He cannot save Himself?

He never does; He never uses His Divine powers for His own ends, to succour or to defend Himself. And fidelity to God will never, until the world is redeemed, mean escapement from suffering. It will never mean a smooth path. There is no doubt whatever that men suffer for their sins, and that is the bitterness of suffering. There is also no doubt that they suffer for righteousness' sake; and if we were more righteous and faithful we might suffer still more, but in that suffering there should be no bitterness, but only joy. That at least is the teaching as well as the example of our Lord.

The Son of God cannot come down from the cross. And no one will question to-day that it was a greater thing to endure the cross than to come down from it; a far greater thing to pray for the forgiveness of His enemies than to smite them with destruction. Suppose He had come down from the cross. Suppose that miracle had happened. Would it have served any great or permanent purpose? Would the men who taunted Him really have believed on Him? Would they not rather have set afoot some new scheme for entangling and killing Him? And would not the greatest lesson of the cross, not to speak of its deepest work, have been lost to humanity? Is it not true that the purpose of God could never have been fulfilled apart from the sufferings of the cross, and may not the parallel hold good in your case and mine?

Further, it is clear that the cross is the way to the overwhelming triumph of the Son of God. It was the way, and the only way, to the conquest of sin and death—the two grand foes of men. It proves that there is a soul of man that cannot be

killed or even touched by the most fiendish malice. It conquers where it seems to be defeated. "Fear not," our Lord had said, "them that kill the body but cannot kill the soul." The soul triumphs where the body is defeated.

Moreover, the cross of our Lord is a standing example of the fact that evil and injustice perpetually overreach themselves. They are the very worst weapons that can be used. Even if your cause be right you have no right to use them. You give even wrong a new lease of life if you treat it with violence and injustice.

Make even a wicked man a martyr and you inevitably advance his cause. Let Protestantism in this country or any other turn an intolerant and persecuting hand on Romanism, and that which was intended to crush and destroy will renew and strengthen. And that is much more true where the persecuted man or cause is right and not wrong. The wrong done recoils sooner or later on the head of the wrong-doer. And on the other hand it cannot be questioned that men have conquered by endurance, and have won their victories through suffering.

The men who have been made true sons of God through their union with Christ and likeness to Him have refused to come down from the cross, to be bribed or threatened from the path of suffering, or to put an end to their suffering by recanting their faith or denying their conviction; and they have been the people who have ever won the greatest victories for the truth; while those who, to avoid suffering, have betrayed the truth, have ever been its greatest foes. It is not the man who can strike back a hard, retaliating blow, but the man who can endure and forgive, who

has rendered the greatest service to the cause of God.

I do not doubt for a moment from my reading of the history of the Christian Church that the cause of our Lord has been advanced by suffering far more than by any other means. "Be of good cheer," said one of the Oxford martyrs to his companion as they were burning at the stake—"Be of good cheer, brother Ridley, we shall this day light such a candle in England as by the grace of God shall never be put out." It is true of many of the servants of Christ in their measure, as of their Master, for the sufferings of death they have been crowned with glory and honour. It is even so expressed by the pen of St. Paul, "If we suffer with Him we shall also reign with Him."

What is the last word? I speak to people who have found trouble, whose feet are on a thorny way; and our whole natural impulse is to avoid trouble of every sort and to rebel when it befalls us to talk about the "hard lines" and the nuisance, especially when other people's faults and follies impose a burden upon us. Here is the counsel of the natural man and of the worldly spirit: "Come down from the cross if you can." Whatever you do, steer clear of trouble. Avoid the burden, put it on somebody else—on people who deserve it if you can, but on anybody; you take the easiest possible path. Take care of yourself.

The New Testament says, Deny yourself; take up your cross; be willing to be crucified with Christ. Suffering is not purposeless, and the cross of the Christian will no more be in vain than the Cross of the Lord. Strange as the mystery may seem, it is true still that the way of ease and self-

protection is the way of barrenness and death, and the way of the cross is the way of redemption and of life everlasting. "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it, and shall keep it unto life eternal."

That is the word of Christ, and is a part of the eternal truth that endureth for ever.

XV

OUR YEARS: THEIR EXPENDITURE AND CHARACTER

"We spend our years as a tale that is told."—PSALM xc. 9.

I

THIS Psalm is called a prayer of Moses the man of God, and there is no sufficient reason for doubting the accuracy of the title. A view recently taken of it is that it belongs to the end of his long and weary sojourn in Midian, where for a generation in the deserts and in solitude of soul he brooded over the mystery of Israel's oppression and slavery. You can easily see how any man in such circumstances could become oppressed with the brevity and the vanity of human life, and how it might appear to him that the wrath of God, Whom he only dimly knew, rested upon his unhappy and homeless countrymen. You can understand also in these circumstances a man betaking himself to God as his only sure dwelling place, and crying as he thought of his enslaved people lying apparently under the shadow of God's anger, "Return; O Lord, how long? and let it repent Thee concerning Thy servants. Make us glad according to the days

wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil." You can understand also the urgency of his prayer that the work of God might be revealed to His people; the fact of it and the nature of it. That it might be made clear to their bewildered minds that He was working, and what His work was. He uses various figures to describe life in the Psalm: "a watch in the night"; grass that is growing in the morning and is cut down and withered by evening; and this, a tale or story, such as a traveller might tell in a shepherd's tent, or as pilgrims might tell to each other to while away the hours of the evening, when the day's work was done.

Of course, the figures impress you with the brevity of life. That is a fact that becomes impressive and almost oppressive to everybody over fifty years of age. It seems but a few days from one Christmas to another. And it is apparently the brevity of life that Moses desires men to be conscious of. He prays, "So teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom." The inference is that it is foolish to refuse to recognize the brevity of life, and to live, as many people seem to do, as if they were going to be here for ever.

I believe there are people who would regard the insistent reminder as an almost impertinent commonplace. They are like children playing an absorbing game, who object to be reminded that the game must cease and bedtime must come. And indeed, if no more depended upon our life than depends on the games of children, we might be forgiven for refusing to think of the end. But if life be a schooling, if its opportunities be

strictly limited, and if they are a great trust reposed in us by the Master of life to whom every man must give an account, then the only rational course is to bear in mind the brevity, the extreme brevity, of life. And, my friends, if we viewed that fact aright we should see, as Professor Drummond has said, that its brevity constitutes its importance and its greatness. Because there is so little of it, we should make the most possible of it. If I am expecting to live in London or New York for twenty years, I shall not be eager to see all its great sights, but if I have only a fortnight there, how important it becomes; or, to take another illustration, if I have six months to prepare a special sermon, I am inclined to set a low value on the importance of the time, but if I have only a few days or hours, how precious the time is! Every moment is golden between friends and lovers when they are within a few days of parting, and it is the brevity of life that constitutes its rich value.

It is the *enormous value* of life that seems to me to lie in the figures of my text. I say figures, for there are two.

Here is the first—"We *spend* our years." That is, our years are our capital, entrusted to us by the Power that determines our lot; we are always spending or misspending our capital. And you cannot arrest the spending; you cannot stop the sands from running out of the glass. Oh, what some people would give if they could! You cannot stop at forty or fifty or sixty, and keep the rest of the years in store. Swiftly the stream carries you on, and you may well ask, Whither?

Time is the one thing that you are bound to go on spending, if you are to live. And nobody

knows what his capital is. The maximum as Moses saw it was seventy or eighty years, but the exact or the approximate amount of your capital is hidden from you. It may be only a few days or even hours. Nothing is so uncertain. People who seem to have a rich store sometimes come suddenly to the end of it, and some whose capital seems like the widow's handful of meal have it lengthened out for many years. There are so many contingencies that even youth and health are no guarantee. You are bound to go on spending your years. The thing you can determine is *how* you will spend them—shall I say what you will buy with them, how you will invest them? Regarding our years as so much capital, we can invest them in that which will bring us sure and gladdening returns; dividends of peace and hope and joy can accrue to us—not to the last hour of life here, but through the eternal ages of the life that is to be; or we can so squander them that they shall bring us emptiness. You can spend them in fireworks that sparkle and glitter and flash and roar and make a brilliant display and then leave you in darkness, or you can invest them in oil for the lamp that will illumine your path and cheer your gloom through dark and weary hours. Just as a man's capital in money may be his curse and ruin, so may his capital in time.

You may illustrate this by periods of life. A lad may so spend the years of his school life as to have nothing wherewith to carry on the work of his after years, or he may spend them so wisely that he has accumulated material for fighting all the battles of his after days.

It is very important that a man should know how to spend his money, whether it be little or

much. He may buy with it some thing of beauty that will be a joy for ever, or he may waste it in useless trifles, and he may even spend it in that which ruins his health and brings him torment and misery.

It is far more important that we should know how to spend our years. You say you spent a day here, a week there, and certain years at such a place. Believe me, the way in which years or days or even hours are spent affects the whole of our after destiny. There is a great deal of wasteful and even wicked expenditure of money. It is to be feared that there is a great deal more wasteful flinging away of time—an expenditure that brings no return. No more vital question could be asked us on this last Sunday of the year than, "How are you spending your years?" For what are our years? Spaces into which life is conveniently divided; sections into which we insert, or fail to insert, certain things, and which we then have to leave, and there they remain, filled up with gold and silver and precious stones, or with wood and hay and stubble; or may we say fields in which we sow good seed, or which are crammed with thorns and thistles and weeds. What are our years? Opportunities for the training and discipline of character, for growing in wisdom and knowledge, in capacity and character, rendering imperishable service to God and man in the Church, the city, and the neighbourhood. And also opportunities for deterioration, for forgetting what we have learned in the past, for growing more foolish and worldly and useless; opportunities for passion and selfishness to tighten their grip on the life, for all generous impulses to dry up, and noble enthusiasms to wither; opportu-

nities for doing such disastrous damage to the soul that it shall never wholly recover from it in time or eternity. Such are our years, and we are spending them rapidly. They are a swiftly diminishing quantity, and if we are to stop the mischief, and secure the good and the profit, there is no time to be lost, not an hour to be misspent. Our prayer may well be, "So teach us to value our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom."

II

Secondly, let us think of the other figure—*a tale or a story.* The figure, of course, is that of the Eastern story-teller, who occupied the place of your modern novelist, telling a story to his listening crowd that might perhaps last for days. A story of love and hate, of peril and escape, of struggle and victory or defeat, of heroic and soul-stirring episodes and achievements, of pathetic sorrow or tragic disaster. Let us understand that there is nothing of necessity depreciatory of human life in the figure. It seems to say you are weaving a story or, perhaps, letting the story weave itself. Of course it may be a very poor story, a wearisome story, poor in art, bad in composition—a story so commonplace and dreary that nobody will care to read it or to hear it. It may be a pitiful and sordid story; it may even be a defiling and nasty story. I remember one of my own young men saying to me of a certain work of fiction of the highly sensational order then widely advertised, "I wish I had never read it. It has left a nasty influence in my life from which I find it almost impossible to escape."

You know all that, and you may be weaving

that kind of a story. But, on the other hand, is there anything into which true art, beauty, lofty teaching, noble impulse, can be wrought more surely than a tale? "Truth embodied in a tale," as Tennyson calls it, "which enters in at lowly doors," means this, that if you are going to teach truth to certain minds you must embody it in a story. So Sir Walter Scott teaches history. So Mrs. Henry Wood and others taught temperance. So some writers teach Protestantism, so our Lord taught divinest truth, and so others teach theology, good or bad. And it is not merely truth embodied in a tale, but truth embodied in persons, in human experiences.

There are two kinds of books far more widely read than any other, and they are often very nearly akin, viz., Fiction and Biography. What is the inference? Why, surely this, that there is nothing in this world so profoundly interesting and moving as the story of human life—what people feel, suffer, do; how men and women fight their battles and bear their burdens; where and by what means they find satisfaction and peace; how they manage to pick their way through difficult problems and to see their path in perplexing situations; what is the secret of courage and cheerfulness and good will.

And it is the man who writes with power a story which at the heart of it is true to life who gets readers. The interest is just here, that he holds up the mirror to life. You see human life in it, life as it is and as it ought to be. You find yourself or somebody else in the story. It may be a story of unrequited love, of unfulfilled desire and unrealized ambition, or of sorely tried patience and faith, of secret agonies and victories, of sins

and sufferings. My friends, it may be fairly questioned, on the basis of the Christian faith, whether there is anything of such thrilling interest in the universe as the story of human life, the struggles, the falls, the victories and defeats of a human soul. For we believe this, that it is so profoundly interesting that the Eternal Son of God for a while lived it Himself, and perhaps His greatest teachings to us are conveyed in the form of human stories like the story of the Prodigal Son.

Let me express my firm belief that there is nothing that God reads with so much interest as the story of the life of man as it is being wrought out from year to year, and that not of man in the mass but of man the individual. What a story it is—heart-stirring here and heart-breaking there—of humour and pathos, of comedy and tragedy!

I wish every man and woman and child of us could believe that the story of *our* life is of infinite interest to God. That life lived even in the humblest circumstances may be a GREAT story—a story that will live long after the man who tells it is gone. Not merely in the memory of man—not that you may leave the footprints on the sands of time which Longfellow sings about—but which may live for ever in the heart of God. *Do* dare to believe that you may live a life here over which God Himself can rejoice, and the memory of which through His grace may be to yourself an eternal joy.

Then let us realize that it may be a pitiful story of folly and failure, of sly deceits and barren driftings, of empty and worthless days and years, of which the best thing that could happen to it may be that God in His great mercy may bury it in oblivion.

It may be a story that begins brightly and ends in gloom and darkness, like the story of Saul and Solomon, kings of Israel. It may be the story of a shipwreck, in which everything is lost, or of a vessel that was wisely steered and that bravely rode the storm and victoriously arrived at the desired haven. It may be the glorious story of a recovery from failure through the might of God.

Surely we can ask ourselves no greater question to-day, as we stand on the margin of another year, than this, "What sort of story am I weaving just now? What turn is my life taking?" Outwardly it may be with some of us a story of waning power; of work that is wellnigh done. Our main achievements—such as they are—lie behind us. But, morally and spiritually, what is the immediate story? Because nothing is more true than that while the outward man perishes the inward man may be renewed day by day.

Is life sagging down with us? Is the present story one of drift? A story of yielding to influences that carry the life away from prayer and away from God and away from the spiritual? Does the end of the year find us farther away from God?

The vital importance of these questions lies here, that at *any* period the story may take a new turn. If there may be a great failure there may also be a great recovery. That is one of the miracles which God's grace can work through a man's will and endeavour.

The past is irrevocable; what we have written we have written. God and men have read it. But again let it be emphatically affirmed, the story may take a new turn. A man can be born anew. He can become a new creation. He can be con-

verted and become as a little child, and he can be converted again. That is the distinct and peculiar promise that the gospel holds out to us. The present method of living can be changed, the drift can be arrested. What is the story of your life as you look back upon it? Every man's life differs from every other, but all are alike in one thing. Every life story is a story of God's loving-kindness; goodness and mercy have followed every one of us all the days of our life. The forbearance and longsuffering, the compassion and love of God have been about us all and greet us now. The failures of the past, therefore, may be forgiven.

Listen, my brethren: the past may be a story of yielding to sin and unworthy living. The present moment may be a record of God's forgiving love. And you may not only turn over a new leaf, you may begin a new volume, you may write in a different strain. The story of your life from this day may be a story of God's renewing and conquering grace; a story of victory. It may be said of you that on the last Sunday in this year you began to live anew. The possibilities of this day and of the few remaining days before the chapter of this year shall have closed are enormous. You may to-day cease from self and begin to live to Christ and to Him alone. It all lies in the immediate and complete yielding up of life to the saving grace and authority of Jesus Christ, and allowing Him to work the work of grace in your heart by His Holy regenerating and sanctifying Spirit. So you will spend the remainder of your years to glorious purpose, and so will the story of your life be worthy to find a place in the book of God's remembrance, which is indeed the book of life.

XVI

LIMITATION AND DEFINITENESS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

"It is not for you to know the times or the seasons. . . . But ye shall receive power. And ye shall be My witnesses." —Acts i. 7, 8.

I

NOTHING becomes clearer to thoughtful men as life goes on than the severe limitations of human knowledge. The more men come to know, the more surely they see the barriers in certain directions which declare "Thus far shalt thou come and no farther." It is but waste of time and effort to endeavour to pierce the mystery. It is impenetrable. You may guess and speculate, you may deal in theories and probabilities, but, after all, you must remain in ignorance. "It is not for you to know." This definite statement is (all the more remarkable because it is) among the last words of our Lord to His disciples—the risen and glorified Lord present with them in mystical form, just before He was parted from them. And we may conclude that it was a word which was intended to ring in their curious and prying and inquisitive minds concerning many things. It is not for *you to know.* There are certain things

that cannot be made clear to you in your present state. You are simply, therefore, wasting time in trying to elucidate them. Hidden they are, hidden they will remain, and all your searching will never find them out.

It is quite easy to see that our Lord is gently but firmly correcting the questioners. By the form of His words He says to them, You are on the wrong track. You are not only asking about things that cannot be made known to you, with the definite knowledge of which you are not to be trusted, but also you are exercising your mind about that which does not vitally matter. Here was the question, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"

He might have told them that they were perfectly ignorant of the nature of the Kingdom of God which He had come to restore in the lives of men. They were apparently incapable of understanding it. Even knowledge concerning that Kingdom might have distressed them. The nature of the Kingdom, and the central force of the Kingdom, and the power of the King—these were the vital questions. And our Lord seems to push back their curious questionings and to send them along another track. Not here, He seems to say, but *there* is your vocation; not to be dealing in dates and figures, but to get to know and understand and use your own vital possessions. It is not for you to know TIMES, but you shall receive *power*, and ye shall be my witnesses; which latter, of course, means that you shall know the things that are vital.

It is still true that there are things we cannot know, and the remarkable fact is that often these are precisely the things that some people seem

determined to know. And their determination to know has created a market. The demand has created a supply of a very dubious stock of speculations and theories and dogmas. The demand to know has been seized upon by the doctrinaire, by the priestly trafficker in mysteries and enchantments, by the quack and the charlatan.

You think of the doctrine of the mysterious Second Advent of our Lord, and of the curiosity to know the manner and the time of it, and then of the whole stream and flood of pamphlets and diagrams and books that have been written and sold, and all the barren and fruitless speculations and disproved assertions of dates which have wasted the time and energies of men which might have been employed in preparing the way for the Son of God. Take, again, the life after death. How little of detail we know about it, and yet how eager and anxious we are to learn all the details. Our dead pass from us into the silence and we wonder where they are and what is their occupation—whether they remember and think of us, whether they come immediately into the presence of the Lord, and how the souls that have so much of the soilure and stain of earth can bear the blinding glory of the Divine Holiness. We are determined to know, and the demand creates the supply; and let it be said that the supply is often of doubtful quality. You get the people who pretend to know; you get the invention, as I feel bound to call it, of the doctrine of purgatory, and the way to get men out of it into everlasting bliss. One of our old hymns begins:

> "In vain the fancy strives to paint
> The moment after death."

But the fancy has persisted, and you have sometimes preachers discoursing on what follows death immediately, and what in detail are the employments of the after life, and books written concerning dreams and visions that have come by day or night to the writers; and bereaved hearts that hunger for knowledge of those whom they have lost, and ache for the renewal of the broken fellowship, eagerly listening and reading about the intermediate and the final state of those who are gone from us.

In addition to all this you have the Psychical Research Society, with its professed means of communication with the unseen world. And last of all the spiritualist, with his seances, his mediums, and his occult mysteries. And when one has read through them all and found much that is reasonable and comforting and even beautiful, one is driven to the conclusion that it is chiefly theory and imagination—pictures drawn by the mind and heart and hope and wish of man, which may have a firm foundation but which *may* also be baseless; and, moreover, that concerning the detail of the life that lies beyond this word is as true to-day as of almost any day since our Lord came: "It is not for you to *know*." The veil is not to be rent or pierced. And while we stand grieving before its heavy folds another word comes to us, also a word of our Lord, "What thou knowest not now, thou shalt know hereafter."

As to the reason for the reticence—may I not call it the dignified reticence?—of the New Testament, while you wonder at it and are sometimes impatient, are you not compelled to the conclusion that it is Divine kindness that veils

it from us, as you in true kindness veil certain things from your children? And while one would never say that people should cease from inquiry and from theorizing, and most of all one would shrink from saying that we shall never get clearer light than we have now concerning the future life—personally I think that depends upon our capacity and our fitness to receive—yet is it not a fact that the withholding of accurate knowledge is in some cases a great blessing?

Take, for example, the life that now is. Do you not wish and long to know the future? Oh, if you could only see what it has in store of marvel or surprise, what the next five or ten years will bring forth! And again, the longing to know has created the market, the supply of palmists, and crystal-gazers, and fortune-tellers who profess to tell their clients the times and the seasons. Yet on calm reflection would you not confess that it is the greatest, Divinest mercy that hides the future from your knowledge? How often I have heard people say, "What a blessing it is that we cannot foretell the future!" It may be most fairly questioned whether any of us could bear to know all that is going to happen to us in this life, and whether the knowledge would not, in one way or another, spoil life for us, robbing us of peace, or zest, or interest; either making it a haunting nightmare, or an idle dream, or a wearisome monotony. Is it not the unexpected that often creates the zest and thrill and interest of life? And may not what is true of this life be reasonably held to be true of the life which is to come? that a fuller knowledge than we have might spoil us for the present and necessary discipline of life?

Is not the knowledge that we have far better than foreknowledge of events would be? What is the knowledge that we Christian people have—the clear and sure knowledge in Jesus Christ our Lord? This, that our Creator, in whose hands our destinies are, whom we can so little understand, the greatness and holiness of whose being completely transcends all human understanding, *is good and merciful*, that He loves us and will never cease to love us. That whatever comes, of seeming good or ill, His love and mercy and truth will never forsake or fail us. Is not that worth infinitely more than all the knowledge of detailed events that could possibly come to us? And looking beyond the present. Suppose people knew definitely, as some have professed to know, how and even when the Lord would come. Suppose you knew precisely when death would come, and what would happen to you immediately after, and what would be your occupation in the after life! Well, the effect of the knowledge on you might spoil your interest in the present, it might undermine your patience and endurance, it might be knowledge that you would misuse; and its value could never be greater than the value of the knowledge that the soul that trusts Christ passes hence into His presence to be with Him for ever, that the same love and mercy are on the other side of the grave as on this; that God's goodness is changeless and lasts for evermore. Here is the language of the man who did not know times and seasons: "I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God."

II

I pass on to notice, therefore, what may be known. "It is not for you to know the times and seasons, but——" You are not therefore to remain ignorant of everything. It is not for you to know times and seasons, but you may know the deeper and more important things. It does not follow that because certain things are hidden from you, therefore you have to walk in total darkness and alone. What is the more important thing? "Ye shall receive *power* when the Holy Ghost is come upon you." I suggest to you that this is a far greater thing than the knowledge of times and seasons, to have *power* to bear whatever comes and to do what the hour and the occasion demands. Of course it means that I need never dread anything, that I shall never be baffled and mastered and overcome. Why do I dread my duties or trials; what is it precisely that I dread in them? Why, that I shall be insufficient, that I will not be equal to them. Show me the path of victory, give me sure ground for assurance, and I am at rest. Well, it seems to me that all the last words of Christ to His disciples are full of inspiration and encouragement. "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," and here, "Ye shall receive power." Is it not a tremendous assurance, and for the man who is in Christ it is absolute, that whatever comes in the ordering of God's good providence he will be equal to it?

And then the assurance goes farther. I am not going to enter upon an exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit at this moment, but this is clear, that whatever it is God's will to keep from His

people, He will not withhold Himself from them. The coming of the Holy Ghost in all its mystery is really the coming of God to dwell with and in men in fuller measure than ever before. And this is perfectly certain, that whatever else the coming of the Holy Spirit meant to these men who were asking their questions about times and seasons—and it meant more than I can say—it meant that they were surer of the reality and the presence of Christ than they had ever been, and that they carried the sense of His presence with them wherever they went.

Therefore the men who did not know times and seasons knew the Risen living, present Christ, and lived daily in the inspiration of His fellowship, receiving daily and hourly of His fullness. And, my friends, these are the great things, "To be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and breadth and depth and height, and to *know* the love of Christ which passeth knowledge."

To know Him and the power of His resurrection, to know Him in whom you have believed, to know the Grace of the Lord Jesus, to know the power of His truth to change human life, and the power of His love to satisfy the soul.

These are the great facts. They may not gratify all my curiosity, but they do what the mere gratification of curiosity could never do—they nourish and strengthen and satisfy the soul, and these are the things that we may know and that God would have us know and that He is longing to impart to us.

III

And the third thing of which I desire to speak is the true vocation of the disciple of

Christ, "Ye shall be my witnesses." There is a great deal in this statement, taken, as it ought to be, in connection with what goes before it. That is your true vocation—not dabblers in occult sciences—not traffickers in theories and speculations, nor purveyors of mysteries, but, *witnesses*. That does not, of course, mean that inquiry and investigation are to cease. They never will cease while man has the power to think and question. But they should surely be directed into channels where certitude is possible. A witness may well be one who has inquired and investigated and discovered, and who then tells what he has found. And these disciples are to be Christ's witnesses. They are simply to tell what they know, and naturally as they know more they will have more to tell, but it is of Him that they are to be witnesses. Not to bear witness merely —that is not unimportant, that pertains to their word and message—but *to be* witnesses, which may well refer to character. As Paul says of the Corinthian Christians, "Ye are our epistles, known and read of all men." If I may put it in this way, they were to be Christ's credentials and advocates, going everywhere to show what He was like, and to declare by character and speech what He could do. And they were to do and be this in Jerusalem and all Judæa and in Samaria, i.e., where Christ was misunderstood and despised and hated; and where He was unknown they were to go and make Him known. Now, see how much greater this is than simply finding out the nature and the time of certain semi-political events, such as the restoring of the Kingdom to Israel, and then going about foretelling the date and the nature of the occurrences. It is really the vital matter, and it is the vital

matters that we have to discover. Life is far too short to spend our time in inquiries and investigations that are barren and fruitless, however interesting they may be; and often the temptation and the peril lies in this, that they serve as substitutes for the vital and necessary things. I do not deny the interest that clusters about the identification of the ten lost tribes, or the return of the Jews to the Holy Land—still less about theories of inspiration, and of conversion, and of Church government, and many other things; but I say again that they are not vital things, and the peril is that we spend time pottering about the circumference which ought to be spent at the centre. The vital question is, Does Jesus Christ live? Does He love? Is He knowable? Can He do that for men which no other can do and which they can never do for themselves? Is He sufficient where He is known to fill the heart with peace and joy? Have we who have professed to believe in Him any witness to bear, any experience of His saving grace—any fact of spiritual experience?

If we have, let us bear our testimony in the face of unbelieving and sometimes scorning men. Let us say, as some of us can say, He is my personal Saviour, and all that I have in life that is most precious I owe to Him, and ever since He met me and I gave myself to Him life has been very different, I have had comfort in sorrow and light in darkness and peace in trouble. And for the rest, my brethren, let this be said: there are many things you can never know till the veil is rent and the mystery of death is passed. These things are not for you to know, but you may know Him and find peace and joy in believing in Him, and this is a knowledge that will never wear out in life or in death or in the life beyond.

XVII

NOT TO PERISH

"Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish."—MATTHEW xviii. 14.

THE paragraph in which these words occur may well be called the children's charter. It sets in the strongest possible light the conception which our Lord taught His disciples to cherish concerning the child.

There is a book written by a student of children called *The Fascinated Child*. Almost anybody could write a book on the fascinating child, for there is no living creature known to us that is one half so fascinating or half so fresh.

It would not be too much to say that our Lord found children infinitely attractive, that He saw in them more than any of the people of His time saw, that He was always attracted by them and to them, that He found in their simplicity and humility, their naturalness and mirth, their truthfulness and love (I am speaking of little children now), that which reminded Him most of the life from which He had come into a world of hard, distrustful, unloving, artificial, and unbelieving men and women. He sets a child in the midst

of His disciples. He holds up its spirit as a model to His Apostles. He seems by His words and actions to say, "The child should be always in the midst of the Church to be kept in sight, and watched, and studied. Woe be to the Church where the child is neglected or despised. He declares that each child has its guardian angel. He pronounces a deep woe on the people who cause it to stumble. He reveals God's purposes concerning it, and casts it on the care of the Church when He says in these concluding words, "It is not the will of your Father that *one* of these little ones should perish"—note the exact phrasing of the text, *one* of these little ones. Let the emphasis be laid upon the individual; it is done all through the paragraph: "Whoso shall receive *one* such little child in My name"—"Whoso shall cause *one* of these little ones that believe on Me to stumble"—"Take heed that ye despise not *one* of these little ones." It all means that every one, the slum child, the neglected child, or the child in the palace, is unspeakably precious to the heart of your Father which is in heaven, who is *its* Father. You find the secret of the preciousness in the relationship which our Lord declares: "It is not the will of your Father," etc. So at least on the highest authority we know the will of God concerning children, without a doubt.

I

Now I must confess that I am arrested by the last word in the text as applied to children, and I ask what it means in the lips of Christ. I take it as applying to any child that may be selected out of the millions of children on the

face of the earth. "It is not the will of God that it or any other should perish."

I suggest to you that we are not to give a physical interpretation or application to the word. Of course a child may perish physically without due care and attention, as thousands of children do. I do not imagine for a moment that our Lord was speaking in that sense or that He would have regarded the death of a little child as a supreme calamity to the child. The whole tenor of the narrative compels you to conclude that He was speaking in the moral and spiritual sense. He uses a word quite familiar in New Testament phraseology—"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that . . . should not *perish*"; "Except ye repent ye shall all likewise *perish*." It is a word St. Paul frequently uses, and he always sets it over against being saved as its exact opposite and alternative. Men are either perishing or being saved. It is precisely the same word in the original as the word "*lost*," we are bound to interpret in the spiritual sense.

So we come upon a thought that should be burnt into the mind of the Church. I think it has become so in the process of the years, though it has taken long to accomplish, viz., *that no one is lost in the intention of God.* It used to be held by a large section of the Church of a former time that certain people were born reprobate, that they were predestined to perdition, created for the very purpose of being lost; and of course it must have seemed to the people who believed it that the vast majority of mankind were born to this awful end.

It was a truly horrible doctrine, held by people who saw human life perishing before their eyes

and who believed it was perishing by the will of God. The Church has shaken itself free from that nightmare, thank God, and holds with St. Paul that it is the will of God that "all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth," and with St. Peter that "He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." And, my friends, whether it be orthodox or unorthodox, I have been long ago—(brooding over this mystery)—driven to the conclusion that the *will* of God is not omnipotent in relation to man, that man can defeat it so far as he himself is concerned and can neglect it and disappoint it, else the whole history of Israel has been written in vain. I have for a long time held that in creating man God limited His own omnipotence that there was in the Deity by that very creative act something of that self-emptying of which we read in the Incarnation of our Lord and Saviour.

It is obvious to everybody who observes things that a great measure of self-government is given to man, that in the very nature of things we are allowed, and we have liberty, to mishandle things, to make mistakes. Freedom of action is given to man, and a consequent burden of responsibility from which he cannot escape. I speak with reverence and weigh my words carefully when I say that it is possible for man to defeat the purposes of God by the stubbornness and wilfulness of his temper. The clay in the hands of the potter may be so stubborn that he cannot make of it the vessel that he would, and he must return and make it another vessel. Or man can stand idly by and *allow* the purposes of God to be defeated; or, on the other hand, he can step in and *prevent*,

by effort and sacrifice and suffering, the defeat of the purposes of God.

When a thing or a person perishes, do not conclude that it is the will of God. No one can persuade me that the destruction of the *Titanic* and the tragic loss of all those who went down with her was the will of God. Probably the vessel should never have been where she was, or being there she should never have been going at the speed at which she was travelling, or more provision should have been made for the rescue and safety of the passengers. Think for a moment. It is not the will of God that children should be neglected, but they are neglected. It is not His will that they should be cruelly treated, but they are. It is not His will that they should grow up ignorant of the spiritual world, and of spiritual facts and possibilities, but they do. There are a thousand things about us that are contrary and antagonistic to the will of God, and the responsibility for their presence and their continuance is not with God but with man. We will not take the trouble or the pains necessary to their destruction or their removal.

II

So, secondly, I come upon this fact, that the little ones may perish in spite of the will of God. Through our unfaithfulness, through our supineness, through our folly or selfishness.

Undoubtedly *a young man can wreck his own life.* He can lay destructive hands on his moral life as truly as on his physical. He can lay waste his powers by self-indulgence. He can defile his imagination by unclean thoughts and

degrade his life by unwholesome acts; but do not let him charge the blame upon God, nor upon certain tendencies of which he finds himself possessed. Let him lay the blame where it truly lies—on himself. He did not fight his evil tendencies. He did not resist, he yielded; and the failure to realize possibilities of good, the wreck and ruin, the perishing of the noble in him, was not the will of God. It could never be.

And what is said of yourself can be said with equal truth of others, and especially of children. There is nothing in all this world so truly beautiful as a little child fresh from the hands of God; this blossom of the spring, this flower in the bud. You think of all the possibilities of good that lie enfolded in it, and you know that they may be all unrealized. You know that that child might be so surrounded and trained that it should know no other mastership of the soul than the mastership of Christ, and you know that every bit of promise of good might be swept out of its life, or might gradually wither and decay. You know that children can be spoilt even by well-intentioned people, utterly spoilt in their character by over-severity or by over-indulgence. By softness, by hot-house treatment, by yielding and allowing the child to rule, by shielding it from the storm and the bracing wind, as well as by the nipping wind of scolding and sarcasm, you can spoil the child in the home. You can ignore the spiritual nature of the child. There can be such a secular and materialistic atmosphere in a home, such an absence of piety, that the early desires after God, which, like the new leaves and blades and petals of spring, begin to stir in the soul of the child, may be held back and unable to grow.

According to this paragraph a child may be caused to stumble, and, let it be understood, the stumbling-block may be in his home. I do not doubt that earlier than we realize the Spirit of God begins to work in the soul of a child, and in its first uncertain steps, when its course should be clear, and its hands judiciously guided, and its aspirations encouraged, there may be some stumbling-block in the home, over which it trips and falls.

Or the stumbling-block may be in the Sunday-school. There may be no fine, helpful atmosphere there, no whole-hearted consecration on the part of the teacher, no great desire or expectation that the child—the lad or the girl—should accept Christ. The talk in the class and the teaching may be altogether lacking in spiritual fervour, may be hindering rather than helpful. There may be a poor and low tone about it which discourages, there may even be a deleterious influence at work. There may be in a Church a profession of religion without the reality, that injures the spiritual life. So a child may be caused to stumble. And what is more likely is that we shall just *allow* it to stumble and to perish. *Neglect* is the grave danger—that we simply leave things alone, that we forget that every child was made for God and is *lost* unless it be gathered for His service; that the tree of child-life was intended to grow the beautiful fruit of goodness, and that there is an infinite loss if it fail. There is danger of the Church failing here through neglect, through insufficient enthusiasm, through lack of enterprise, through lack of discernment. In presence of sad failure of parental duty in this matter and the incapacity

of the State in the spiritual realm, an enormous responsibility rests on the Church. We must not allow the will of God to be defeated; we must not allow our Lord to be robbed of His rights in the young life about us.

For the world is full of moral and spiritual perils to-day—never was it fuller. As in nature, so in the moral and spiritual realm there are pests that attack the new life of the spring, and unless there is some power of resistance in the life, some nutrition imparted to the life, and some watchful care exerted over it, it will be devoured and destroyed. There are books, plenty of them, that are as moral poison to the lads and girls who get hold of them. There are amusements that are destructive of purity of mind and heart, and there are companionships that are simply ruinous to all that is noblest and best. There is one certain fact, as certain as that we are gathered here this morning, viz., that there are people who drift into our free shelters, who shamble along in the shadows of the London streets, or who bury themselves in distant lands, or who live in London on the shameful wages of sin, who, if you could come face to face with them, would tell you that they had memories stored away and rarely brought to light of a Sunday-school class, of a pew in the church, of a Christian home and a pure and happy childhood.

And there is another haunting possibility which you cannot shake off, that the child who is with you to-day, and whom you clasp closely as you think of all the wickedness of the world, and the children who are about you may come to be among these lost souls who fail of the purpose

of life, who drift uselessly and fruitlessly through life and lose its great prizes of high character and achievement, *and it is not the will of God.* "It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that *one* of these little ones should perish."

III

Then what is to be done? Well, it is a great thing to begin with to know what the will of God is; to know without doubt that it is on the side of everybody who would save the children, that you have this Divine and mighty ally in every attempt to succour and shelter and equip the life of the young, that the pure benediction of Christ the Lord falls on everybody who will receive a child in His name—that is, who will take responsibility for it and seek to secure it for Him and for goodness. It is a fact to inspire every worker in this field with hope. If you sow your seed wisely and diligently, God will take care of it.

Then take your steps. Open your eyes to facts, see what the perils are—and be in earnest. Believe that children need not be lost to God—will not if Christian parents and the Christian Church do their duty. And the duty is great, not small. Of all work in the world it must not be trifled with or done negligently. Everything in the way of appliances which the teachers need the Church should willingly provide, even at the point of sacrifice. And then the emphasis must be laid not on the appliance but on the teacher. There is the vitally important factor. It is *personality* that impresses, and it is through personality that people are won and saved.

But means must be adopted or provided. Not

merely of a deterrent or negative kind. The Church and Sunday-school have not to devise means merely to keep young people out of mischief. Not to say "Thou shalt not," merely. Not to amuse and interest, but to profit, must be the ideal. Not to keep children from vice and to make them respectable merely, but to lead them to positive faith—to so set Christ before them that they shall fall in love with Him. Do let us learn not to be afraid of troubling the child with religion. Believe rather that it was made for religion; realize that it is a spiritual being. Never think of religion as dreary—of prayer and play, of mirth and piety, as being divorced. Never hesitate to urge the claims of Christ upon children, to set His beauty before them. He came to win them, He died to save them; they belong by right to Him. The Sunday-school teacher has failed in duty who has not sought to win the scholar for Him. It is the main business of the Sunday-school. Depend on it they are only safe from the perils of the way as they commit themselves to His protecting care. The only guarantee that your child will not go wrong is that he shall go positively right. The only guarantee for the absence of vice is the presence of faith. The fascination of the lower will only be conquered by the charm of the loftier, the love of the base cast out by the love of the noble. Undoubtedly the supreme work of the Sunday-school is to secure the young life for Christ and so to secure the fulfilment of all its blessed possibilities. It can be done. But not without effort—sacrificial effort. And not without thought and art and skill, the study of the child and the study of the truth. And never without earnest prayer for

guidance and wisdom and power, realizing that in this work you are really in partnership with God and co-operating with His will. Let us give ourselves to our work with a truer devotion. Let it find a warmer place in our affection. Let us open our eyes to its sacredness and to its vital importance. And let our dear young people know, amid the temptations which assail and plague them, that the will of God is that they fight and overcome, that they live pure, speak true, and follow the Christ. That they may begin the following this day, and that in the following of Christ their lives will come to the fullest possible beauty and fruitfulness.

XVIII

NOT FASHIONED BUT TRANSFIGURED

"And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."—ROMANS xii. 2 (R.V.).

THIS verse is joined to the previous verse by the conjunction "and." And that verse is joined to all the previous part of the letter by the word "therefore," which of course is a reminder of all that had gone before. These people had been "justified by faith," they had died to the world, and been buried, in their baptism. Therefore they were to live a dedicated life. They were called to be saints. He beseeches them, not to punish and torture and macerate their bodies or their faculties, but to consecrate them. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye *present* your bodies." Do not scorn them and think evil of them; present them unto God. Place them upon the altar. It might have been assumed that they had done so. But we assume many things that may not be facts. And we do some things that need to be done over again. What we put on the altar slips off. What we gave once to God we may have taken back,

and it needs to be given again. The bonds which unite us to our Lord become loosened by the strain of life and need to be tightened again. And then it is to be feared that there are instances in which the whole life even to the body is not presented at the beginning. The Christian name is taken very lightly in some instances. It is difficult to say precisely what it means. Just a little friendliness towards Christ, a little sentiment of good wishes, a liking for some of the forms of religion, the poetry and music of the hymns, the reasoning or eloquence of a sermon, the decent and moral friendships of the Church, and nothing more. A shallow and superficial conception of what it means to be a Christian—nothing very serious or radical or distinctive. And we who have the management of Churches are sometimes careful about statistics, and sometimes afraid of discouraging anybody who wishes well even in the mildest way to religion or has the slightest leanings thereto, and moreover we are so inexpert at reading the hearts of others that we are apt to lower the demands of Christ and to loosen His stringent conditions. So that there may be many people in the Church who have never presented their whole selves as living sacrifices to God—giving themselves up entirely to His authority and His saving and sanctifying grace. And it is for us to say whether we are among the number. It is to us and to all professedly Christian people that the inspired apostolic call comes—do not let it fall on unheeding ears—"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice." And this, "*Be not fashioned by this age.*"

I

That is the first point which I emphasize, and it indicates the great and grave danger. The world is always with you. The impact of its life and spirit is always upon you, and it is aggressive and importunate in its appeals. It is a stream that flows swift and strong about your feet. It evidently wants you. Its rewards are obvious. It dangles its money-bags before the eyes of men. Its appeals to you in the direction of a life of pleasure fill your hoardings Sundays and week-days. Its pleasures stretch out beckoning hands from the advertisement columns and the pictures of your daily papers. The world of to-day is very much better than the pagan world of St. Paul's day. Its pleasures are less coarse and brutal; its customs are less revolting. The influence of the Christian conscience has made itself felt, and has elevated the whole tone even of those who do not confess the Christian faith. The spirit of the world robes itself to-day in a very alluring garb. It promises you things in which there is *no harm*. It invites you with the promise of a good time. It removes restraints out of your path. It offers you a life without a cross and without self-denial. Its aim appears to be to fascinate and captivate. It is so good-natured and accommodating and convictionless, and without scruple, save in those things that are intensely spiritual and earnestly religious. Those things it abhors, as it does on the other hand shockingly immoral things.

Personally, I doubt whether the world—the general spirit of man—was ever more dangerous to earnest Christian living than it is to-day, and

there was never more need than now for the trumpet warning of the inspired Apostle, "Be not fashioned according to this world."

Let us try to understand precisely what the Apostle means. Really, do not allow yourselves to be shaped or moulded by the pattern of the world; do not let it be your standard; do not copy its spirit or live by its ideals; do not allow it to be your ruling authority, to shape your policy or your conduct. It does not mean of necessity that you must abstain from everything that the world does; that because the world plays a game, or has a certain pleasure, therefore you must not join in it. It depends on what the game is, and also on the spirit in which you enter into it, and also on its effect on you. It were almost as reasonable to argue that because the world buys and sells and trades therefore Christian people should not, as to argue that they should keep clear of all worldly amusements and all politics. It rather means that you are not to do or allow a thing simply because the world does it, and because it will sneer at you and dislike you if you do not. It means that the world is not to determine my conduct. It is not to decide how I shall earn or spend my money. It has not to set the fashion for me. The worldly woman is not to teach the Christian woman how she should *dress*, or how she should order her home, or what ideals she should set before her children. It means that my book of instruction is in another quarter, my authority is otherwhere. I do not take my guidance from the world's frown or smile. I am neither to aim at being in the fashion, nor am I to be afraid of being out of it. My life is to be overshadowed, nay, rather to be illumined, by the

example and teaching of Jesus Christ, who is my only Master.

Really, our relation to the world is quite of another sort. We are to set the fashion, and it is to be wished that Christian women would do it in the matter of dress both morning and evening. Why should Christian women make themselves ridiculous and dress almost immodestly at the bidding of what is called fashion?

Who does not remember the words of our Lord, that the people whose main consideration is food and dress, who think far more of outward adornment than of what Peter calls the hidden man, of the heart, knowledge, virtue, and goodness, are heathen and not Christian? And what is true of dress holds of other things. You have another life to live that the world is absolutely careless and ignorant of, that it takes no stock in—the life of faith, the life of the soul, the life of communion with God, and the things which the world allows and does may damage that life and destroy it. And it is not of that life in yourself of which you have to think alone. Your business is not merely to possess and cultivate that life in yourself; your business also is to spread it to others, to propagate it and win people to it. You are not to be ruled by the world, therefore—that will simply stifle your life. You are to influence it, to bear your witness in it, which witness *may* be a protest; you have an infinitely superior position. If things are as they ought to be, you have by far the best of it. You have pleasures of which the world knows nothing, in which it only dimly believes. You may well be sweet and gracious in your carriage towards the world, serve it with deeds of love and kindness at every

turn, but you are not to be so charming and accommodating as to go with it; you are rather to exert your charm to win it to purer and higher pleasures. My dear friends, you know well our peril. I speak to people who understand. We naturally want to be on good terms with people about us, to please them if we can, and not to be objectionable and peculiar; least of all do we want to set ourselves up to be superior. We dread Pharisaism, and so we yield. I am sure there is something in that, but I am sure there is sometimes something else, and that is sheer cowardice with some of us. We are afraid of the cutting sneer or the gibe—we are desirous above all things of being popular—which is about as near to the worldly spirit as anything can be; so we allow ourselves to be absorbed, and there is the peril. Here, for example, is a young man who has come up to London from the provinces for study or business. He has been trained in certain principles with regard to simplicity and frugality of life, with regard to the observance of Sunday and Church relationship. He has come from a home where vital godliness obtains, and he is himself a professed Christian. Now he finds himself in a perfectly different atmosphere. It may be frankly worldly, with open disregard of the things that are sacred to him, or it may be an atmosphere which is only nominally and formally Christian, with looseness of principle and conviction everywhere. Now the question, the vital question, is, Will he succumb to his atmosphere? Will he lose gradually not only his provincial accent but his wholesome spirit and his lofty ideals? Will he drift out of prayer

and out of the sense of the reality and value of religion, and so become a part of the current? or will he hold his own? Will he keep himself unspotted from the world? Will he simply but firmly hold to his pure and simple ways and refuse to conform? Ah! God grant that he may, for by so doing he will not only keep his own life, but to a far greater extent than he knows he will influence others. He will not be a resisting but an attractive force. He will not be a rock against which the waves break in vain, he may actually turn the tide. It is not merely that we may escape injury to our own souls and keep our life intact in order that we may convey blessings to others that this great injunction is given, "Be not conformed to this world."

II

Now, secondly, let me call attention to the fact that this is not the only thing that the Apostle says. The statement does not stand by itself, it never could. To refuse conformity to the world is by no means the whole of Christian duty. A man may do it and have nothing distinctively Christian about him. *Non*conformity is simply negative. It is total abstinence, and nobody is saved by total abstinence.

A man may refuse conformity to the world and be just a cynic or a misanthrope, or what is known as an Ishmaelite. He may be at war with society and be animated by motives of scorn and hatred.

All nonconformity that is worth anything grows out of conformity. That is true ecclesiastically. Our nonconformity to the Church of England

was originally an inevitable consequence of conformity to the mind of Christ and allegiance to His will. It was religious and not irreligious, and it is the smallest part of our Christian life.

So let me say that nonconformity to the world, important as it is, is the smaller part of the Christian life. You may refrain from all the pleasures of the world, and at the same time may be greedy and grasping and selfish, and self-righteous and sordid and mean, and hard and merciless, which are all un-Christian and anti-Christian. So this exhortation and warning stands between two other statements. First, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice." Then, "Be transformed." These are the great, vital, positive things. Be *transformed*—literally metamorphosed. It is the same word that is used of the transfiguration of our Lord.

It is very interesting that both these words are in the passive voice—as though you could be played upon and moulded mainly by either one of two sets of influences. You can *be* conformed or you can *be* transfigured. You cannot get away from the world. You must breathe the spirit of the age as you breathe the fogs of the winter. You must mingle in the world's work and in some of its pleasures as our Lord did. You ought to take part in the life of your time, public, municipal, and imperial. But while you do it you are not to be under its dominion. Another dominion is over you. It is the dominion of Christ, and His protection is over you also.

My friends, I believe the world is as full of moral and spiritual perils as it is full of physical. That as you cannot go on a voyage, or travel in a train, or, most of all nowadays, cross the streets

in London without some amount of risk, so you cannot live the Christian life without risks. And I believe it to be God's will that we should take the risks; that not in cloistered seclusion, but out in the open, Christian character is to be achieved. Your duty will compel you to listen to the ribaldry or the scepticism of an office or a workshop, or to pass through the tainted atmosphere sometimes of an art studio or a medical school, or to witness the trickiness and sharp practice here and there of trade. And just as physically you take all necessary precautions and do not foolishly and wantonly endanger life or limb, so morally and spiritually you will take precautions. You will not put your head into the lion's mouth in order to demonstrate your courage, nor rush into the traffic to show how nimble you are. You will invoke the protection and safe keeping of your Lord, and you will go nowhere where you cannot do that. And we shall take every opportunity of getting into the other sort of fellowship, the fellowship that nourishes and strengthens our best and highest life—Christian fellowship and Christian society. There is the great value of the Christian Church and the Christian home. But most of all our safety lies here: we must maintain fellowship with Christ and emphatically refuse everything that weakens that fellowship. And where it has been weakened, where the contact has been broken, hasten to renew it. The man who dwells in the secret place of the Most High, which is the place of communion, "shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day, nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that waiteth at noonday." To him our Lord says, "Be

of good cheer; I have overcome the world." To him also He says, "Behold, I give unto you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you." The Second Epistle of Peter speaks of those who have "escaped from the defilements that are in the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." And it all means that there is power of resistance to be obtained by us, to be imparted to us, so that in the very midst of defilement a man can be kept pure, and amidst the perfect torrent of worldly influence he can maintain his spiritual footing, and, what is more, can become growingly pure and heavenly minded. It can be done. It is being done.

My Christian brethren, I commend to your careful attention this word, "Be ye transformed." Get and keep at all costs where the transforming and renewing influences can stream upon you. That is, keep—as you value your character and influence, keep in contact with Christ. Paul uses the same word in 2 Corinthians in the familiar passage, "We all with unveiled face, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image."

The world is bound to affect you adversely. Constant contact with men who care nothing for the authority of Christ, and who do not believe in the existence of spiritual pleasures or facts, and contact with systems and customs that from foundation to summit have nothing that is distinctively Christian, and with a spirit that is purely materialistic, tends always to deaden your finer sensibilities, to damp your enthusiasm, to dispel your fervour, and to weaken your convictions.

Here is the great fact which is at the heart of the situation for Christian people. You may live near to the source of constant renewal; you are not left alone, you may every day be the subject of this transforming grace. You can bathe your soul in the laver of regeneration. More truly than the mud of the city street can be brushed from your clothes, and the soilure of the office washed from hands and face, the stain and soilure of the day can be cleansed from the soul by the cleansing energy of the Spirit and the sacrificial love of Christ. The exhausted power of resistance can be replenished by the communicated might of the Son of God. He that sent you is with you, He has not left you alone. You may cry in full assurance of faith—

> "Rock of ages, cleft for me,
> Let me hide myself in Thee."

He will be your rock and refuge.

There is no need to be fashioned according to this world; you may triumph over it and even lead some part of it captive. Your liabilities are tremendous, but your assets far exceed them. I like that great word of this man who seemed to revel in his spiritual possessions, "We are *more than conquerors* through Him that loved us." It is a great deal to be conquerors, but it was not enough for St. Paul. He wanted to be conductor, leader, guide; not only to escape and resist, but to deliver other men out of the snare of the devil, to carry the war into the enemy's country, and he did; and by the grace of God he was all the stronger for the battles he fought and the temptations that assailed him, and his source of strength and renewal may be ours also.

That is all that my space allows me to say to-day, save this. I may be speaking to men with whom the contact has been broken and in whom resistance has broken down and the world has conquered. You have lost the practice and art of communion with Christ, and there is nothing for you now, you think, but to go with the stream. Thank God that is not true; the contact can be re-established, the broken fellowship can be renewed. The one thing that God can do with backsliding is to heal it: "He restoreth my soul." He seeks that He may bring back the straying and imperilled sheep. To them that are far off as well as to them that are nigh the word is, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind"; and that is the work that the Spirit of God does in all who return to the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls.

XIX

THE CHURCH AND THE OUTSIDER

"Walk in wisdom toward them that are without."—COLOSSIANS iv. 5.

I TAKE the term "outsider" in its broadest sense. I mean not merely the people who stand without all our Church organization, but those who are without Christ, who do not submit to His authority nor consult His will. There are such people both within and without our Church organizations. Perhaps it is necessary for us to recall our minds to the great and simple fact with all its solemn implications, that all the people about us are either in Christ or out of Him. And to this fact also, that all the people who are in our Churches are supposed to be in Christ. They join our communion on profession of their faith, which means the definite entrustment of their lives to the saving grace and authority of Jesus, and their acceptance of Him as Saviour, Lord, and King. The Church of Christ as we understand it is a community of regenerate and believing souls who have not only a definite relation to their Lord and to each other, but also a definite relation and responsibility towards them

that are without. And there are few things that need more careful consideration than this relation. There are perils of which we need to be aware, and duties to be seriously and intelligently attempted.

One of our perils is that we shall be *afraid of the outsider*—of his opinion and judgment, his criticism or disapproval. There has been in my time on the part of some of the Churches almost an apotheosis of the person known among us as "the man in the street." His opinion on the beliefs and practices, the policy and duty of the Church have almost been thought to be inspired. He has been credited with special illumination; his tastes have been consulted; he has been thought by some to be perfectly competent to instruct the Church in the conduct of its sacred business.

An exaggerated estimate of his qualifications has endowed him with the power to judge the saints if not angels, and the Church has sometimes been in awe of him, afraid of his adverse judgment and almost more afraid of his sneers.

And if I alter the term and speak in scriptural phrase of the men of the world, I would like to say that we are not to be afraid of them. We are to love them far too well to be afraid. And they are neither competent to rule or to judge the saints. We have one Ruler and Judge. We must study them, we may learn from them, but we may not pander to them, nor widen the door nor lower the threshold at their demand. They are not to determine our faith or our policy. We are never to sue for their patronage or modify our principles in order to gain their support. We are not to be unduly cast down when their judgment goes

against us, nor puffed up beyond measure when they approve and speak well of us.

It is possible for the Church to pay far too great a price for the applause of the outsider. You may be voted all right by him and quoted by him with approval, and be all wrong with your only Master and Judge. Along with great lowliness of mind the Church of Christ should carry herself with a certain dignity and self-respect, as the elect bride of Christ. She should refuse to give herself away, to forfeit her prerogatives, or to haggle over the authoritative terms of discipleship.

In a sense the world's opinion of us should be a matter of no importance. It is not qualified nor expert. It is possible that when we are called uncomplimentary names by it we are nearest to Christ. The blessing is not to the Church when the world speaks well of it, but rather to the persecuted. "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye." "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you."

THE OPPOSITE PERIL IS THAT OF INDIFFERENCE to the outsider on our part—not that we care little for his opinion, but that we care little or nothing for *him*; that we go on our way as if we had our life to live and he had his, and we had no responsibility.

It is impossible to maintain that attitude in the light of the teaching and practice of the New Testament. That teaching clearly is that our neighbour who is outside is our responsibility—a part of our solemn and inescapable entrustment.

My own conviction is that in many instances the outsider knows that, and wonders that we take our responsibility so lightly.

We may not allow the world to rule us, we may

deny its right or power to judge us, but there are certain claims which it may legitimately make upon us in the name of Christ.

The Church, so it be a part of the Holy Catholic Church, is not a mere voluntary human society, a community drawn together by identity of opinion on theological or ecclesiastical matters, or electing to combine for the prosecution of certain philanthropic and religious enterprises.

There is something supernatural about the true Church of Christ. It is a part of His mystical body. It has spiritual illumination which the world has not—a closer relation to Christ than the world can know. It is the authoritative organ and instrument of His will, the purveyor of His grace, the channel of His word and His power, His visible witness and representative in the world. And the outsider is an inevitable part of our stewardship. For him Christ died. Him Christ loves. His Master and Lord Christ is by eternal right. The Church is set in the world to lay siege to him, to care for him, to witness to him of Christ, to win him.

He ought to know that the Church exists. Of our Lord in the days of His flesh we read that He could not be hid. Wherever He was men knew. About the saddest fate that can befall the Church is for the people in its neighbourhood to be or to become unaware of its existence. There it stands frequented by a few peculiar people who do not touch the life of the neighbourhood at any point, or make any difference to it. That could never be said of the ministry of our Lord, and it will never be able to be said of a live Church of His. Personally I would rather a thousand times see a Church abused, hated, and persecuted than see

it ignored as a dead thing or a thing of no importance.

We ought to be making our impression, and if I may be allowed my own judgment, I would say that the first and chief impression which a Church makes on a neighbourhood should not be by curious and sensational advertisements. It should rather be by living witness and service.

With regard to many of the outsiders, our first impression will not be made by pulpit preaching, because they will not come near it, be it never so eloquent or be the advertisements never so cunningly devised. And the very last thing they will come to—let us face the fact—is an avowed evangelistic mission. Such missions as a rule do not touch the outsiders. In multitudes they give the church a wide berth. An almost insuperable prejudice has grown up in their minds against it, or they have lost a taste for our services, and are indifferent. They do not want to come, and do not see why they should.

But professedly Christian people are making their impression upon these people every day. In office and factory, and shop and home; what manner of people we are, what specimens of character and conduct we furnish, whether we are strictly true and honourable in word and dealing; whether we are just and considerate and generous, whether we are lovely and pleasant in our lives, whether we do justly and love mercy, and walk humbly with our God; whether we really try to keep the word of our Master and to walk by His law; whether we are as greedy and selfish and grasping and hard in common things as the most worldly man; whether we are faithful and conscientious, and absolutely trustworthy—these are the things that

really tell and that make our spoken word weighty or worthless. There in daily common life the Christian is to walk in wisdom towards them that are without, and there is the opportunity that is to be eagerly bought up. It is a very sad thing when our *ministers are not preaching evangelical* sermons, when the fervent appeal to men to be reconciled to God is missing. It is an infinitely sad thing if our people are not living evangelical lives, if in character and conduct they are not evangelical. The evangelistic appeal on the lips of the Church may be put to shame by the life of the Church on the one hand; or we may so live, on the other, as to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour, and people will suffer and even welcome the spoken word because of the life that lies behind it. We may possibly give an altogether wrong impression of what it is to be a Christian. My dear friends, we shall not arrive at the duty of the Church to the outsider save as we see the duty of the individual Christian. The Church is a community of individuals. We come together in part that we may be instructed and stimulated, for daily Christian living. And you will forgive me if I urge that it is in our scattered capacity that a considerable part of our work must be done, and our influence exerted, and our impression made. We create as individuals in part at least the reputation of the Church. The most that many outsiders know of the Church they know through us. We are the living epistles of the Church, known and read of all men, and the strength or weakness of the Church's testimony lies in large part in the character of her members. They are her products put upon the markets of the world.

I am urging, dear friends, in all affection and humility, the solemn responsibility for the outsider of the individual Christian; I am pleading for the evangelistic spirit to be cultivated in unofficial places and in daily life; I am pleading for the evangelistic spirit on the part of the disciple of Christ.

There is a third grave peril besetting us to-day. It is the peril of thinking that it does not greatly matter whether the outsider is won or not. Our fathers in evangelism were spurred on to their task by the awful conviction that if men were not won to Christ, if they were not converted, they were lost for ever and ever, doomed to everlasting and hopeless sorrow and darkness and shame. A vast pity for the souls of men and a deep desire to snatch them from so terrible a fate moved the preachers and the Christians of an older time to ceaseless effort to turn men to God.

There is no denying that we have lost in great part the horror that our fathers had of the future state of those who are disobedient and impenitent, and who went down to the mysteries of death unreconciled and strangers to God. We think that we have a broader and loftier conception of the Divine mercy. Whether it be truer or not, we may some of us have got so far as to think that it does not greatly and vitally matter whether men are brought to Christ or not. It may be that we have ceased to read our Bibles, and so have created for ourselves a good-natured Deity who will suspend all the laws that bind together cause and effect and make it His business to see that nobody is allowed to suffer whatever his condition or character. We are taking our ideas of God from the man in the street rather than

from the New Testament. We are adopting current ideas too much instead of discovering truth and declaring it. And it is time for many of us to ask ourselves deeply and seriously, "Does it really matter, does it make a vital, deep, cleaving difference in childhood and youth, in middle life and old age, in the hour of death and in the day of judgment, whether a man fears God or not, whether he is in Christ by the response of faith and daily obedience, whether his life is brought under law to Christ and so the purposes of God are fulfilled in him—or whether he is out of Christ by indifference and refusal and self-will, living from day to day without acknowledging Christ, without any submission to His authority or obedience to His commandments?" If it does not greatly matter, why did He come? Why did He plead so passionately with men? What is the meaning of His agony and passion? Why does He speak the parables that search our hearts and fill us with awe, of the unprofitable, the wretched and slothful servant; the foolish virgins and the woe of those whose doom is the shut door, the outer darkness, the worm that dieth not and the fire that is not quenched? What does He mean by the great division between the wheat and the tares, and the sheep and the goats?

It is impossible to think that He is trifling with us, or that the opinion of the man in the street or the mild and convictionless theorizer in the Church is for a moment to be set over against His judgment.

We know that there is a vital and tremendous difference, that men are perishing and lost now, and that it can never be the same with the man who neglects, and refuses, and disobeys, as with the

man who hears, and responds, and does. The one builds on the eternal rock; and the other, without a foundation, builds on the sand.

And the business of the Church, with something of the Passion of her Lord, is to seek by all means to lead men out of one condition into the other; and failing the endeavour, the Church will surely be guilty of unfaithfulness to a great and holy trust.

How can we discharge our trust? I have spoken of our personal relationship with men and of the impact of our character on the men of the world. But now what can the Church do as a body with respect to the outsiders?

I hope it will not seem unreasonable if I suggest as one most important thing that we should take care that their numbers are not increased from our own ranks. I refer now to the young people in our Sunday-schools. It would be an immense gain if we could keep and increase our hold on what we have there, if all our scholars were prevented from ever becoming outsiders; if they could be kept within the shepherdly care of the Church until they were brought completely into the fold. I suggest that there is needed a great accession of evangelistic fervour in our Sunday-schools, a deeper and more earnest desire to secure, on the part of the young people, definite decision for Christ while they are in the school. Many of the most rank outsiders were formerly scholars in our schools, and have been allowed to drift right away.

I would suggest that continuous endeavour be made to bring these people within the influence of the services of the Church. Some of them are known to most of our members. On the occasion of a great evangelistic effort, like a special mis-

sion, we make such an endeavour. There is often a house-to-house visitation with invitations to the special services. Could not some such effort be constantly made? Might not Christian women who make afternoon calls on their sisters for other matters do a little work in this direction? Might it not be done unofficially and in a spirit of friendliness among our neighbours and friends?

Are we not in danger of forgetting that the Christian faith is essentially missionary and propagandist, and that if the Church be not continually expanding its borders it must die? Moreover, if we believe in the value of preaching we must endeavour to bring people under its influence. We could call for people who go nowhere, and if the sittings in our pew are all taken we could cheerfully give up our own. I do not know how the people are to be brought to Church if we do not go after them, and some of them would resent our effort far less than we think, and some would welcome it with great delight.

Even if people did not come to public worship, a sympathetic call might be periodically made, the Church magazine left, and perhaps some kindly service done. Surely a Church is set down in a neighbourhood, not to be supported or patronized, but to support, to help, to succour, to reproduce—so far as it can be reproduced—the ministry of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Of course, there must be something in the Church itself for the outsider if he should come. There should be a warm welcome whatever pew he may stray into. If we must have sittings appropriated and subscribed for, and Church treasurers say we must, at least let us be willing to relinquish them occasionally for the blessing of others. This is a

message to a Church, and not merely to a Christian home: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers." Let them feel the atmosphere of warm welcome and of Christian friendship. Let there be no difference made between the rich and the poor. There must be more than a welcome, of course: there must be a message, a living message, from a sympathetic heart that will appeal to the soul and the conscience of men. A message received from the living Christ and throbbing with His compassion and solicitude for men. And there might be sympathetic and tactful conversation afterwards on the relation of the soul to Christ.

Let me say that I think there should be preaching outside the Church buildings—in the open air, in the park, or the open space in towns; on the village green, where the claims of our Lord should be reasserted, and men should be reminded of the way of life and salvation and of the solemn responsibility of neglecting and refusing the call and claim of their rightful King. One reads and hears of active political propaganda; of how men and women of great ability will speak in the open air on Home Rule, or Woman's Franchise, or Social Reform, and is inclined to wonder how it is that so few cultured lips and eloquent tongues are found outside the walls of the Church, pleading the cause of Christ and endeavouring to win men over to His side! How is it that there is so little enthusiasm? Is it that it is being smothered with conventionality and officialism, or is it because we do not see the mighty issues involved and the stupendous trust committed to our keeping?

Oh, my brethren, the Church has a great business on hand, and there is grave danger that we be slothful in it, that we bury our talents for witness-

bearing in the earth and trifle with a great opportunity and a sacred trust, and even that we be found sleeping at our post by our Lord when He comes.

So few of us are really in earnest, so few of us care whether men are saved or lost. We do not work at our business of being Christians. It is the annexe of life and not its central chamber. So few of us are doing anything, and our religion is formal and apathetic. We must all plead guilty to coldness and negligence in this great matter of seeking to extend the boundaries of the Kingdom of our gracious Lord, the rightful King of men. I pray that we may all be aroused to a keener sense of our responsibility for those who are without Christ, and that there may come upon the whole Church a baptism of holy passion and desire for the winning of the world to the feet of our Master.

XX

THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL

"The hope of the gospel."—COLOSSIANS i. 23.

I LINGER first for a moment over the word "hope." It is, as you know, one of the group of the Christian virtues or graces: "Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three." It seems to me sometimes that Hope does not abide in the *répertoire* of the modern preacher. She appears to be the neglected sister of the group. For every sermon you hear on Hope you will probably hear twelve on Faith and twenty on Love. And yet, Hope shares the quality of her sisters. She is overshadowed by them, but she belongs to them, and there is a great unworked field on the subject of Hope for the Christian preacher.

If you were to search you might be surprised to discover how great a part hope plays in the preaching and working of Paul: We "rejoice in hope"; "we are saved by hope"; God is "the God of hope"—that is, He has hope in Himself for men and He inspires men with hope. And not only does this virtue play a considerable part in the exhortations of Paul, but he himself is a shining and conspicuous example of the spirit of hope. He is, if I may say so, an incurable, invincible optimist.

You find him in many places, but never under the juniper-tree, though he comes near to it in Romans vii. But concerning Christ and the gospel, and their ultimate and complete victory and triumph, I cannot find a single despondent note in the whole of the Apostle's teaching. He never dreams for a moment that the gospel will fail, or that the man who preaches it will be put to shame. Paul is grand company for a depressed soul. There is no man like him in the New Testament. He is a continual spiritual tonic. When I get down, I go to him, He always sings to me this song: "Be not weary in well doing: in due season ye shall reap, if ye faint not." I try to learn of him how to preach; I try to learn of him how to be a pastor, how to "suffer hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ"; how to love men—awkward men, unlovable men, cranky men. And I learn of him the spirit of hopefulness. And I say, if Paul could be hopeful, any man may, for he had as many rebuffs and disappointments as anybody, and nobody has ever lived in a darker time.

Now if I look abroad on the Church to-day—I see not only that we are neglecting to preach upon the Christian virtue of hope, but that the evangelical Church is not characterized just now by a hopeful spirit. We are a good deal depressed; we walk pensively and in the shadows. Perhaps some of you are almost bankrupt in hope. About your Church, about your Sunday-school class, about your children, about the cause of Christ in the earth, your hope is dim. Now may "The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing" and send you back abounding in hope. I believe it was D. L. Moody who said it was very difficult for God to use a despondent man. I do

not believe there is much scope in the pulpit of the Church for a lugubrious prophet or a pessimist. He had better keep at home.

What is hope? It is one of the things difficult to define. *Expectancy* is in it, for one thing. Expectancy means to look out from yourself to another, or from your own time to another. It is really believing in the bird in the bush. It is living in the future. *Desire* is in it, too, not merely expectancy, for you may expect a thing and dread it. But desire is in hope. You wish for a thing, you desire it, you expect it. And *anticipation* is a part of it—"forefancying," as Samuel Rutherford says, bringing the future near, looking at the unseen. Hope is the idealistic temperament. It sees the things that are not. The ancients used to say that hope was at the bottom of the vase; when everything else had been emptied out hope was left. When you no longer believe, you hope. Hope remains the sentry on the field even when love has fled. Hope, in the Christian sense, is not satisfied with things as they are, but believes and expects that the wrong things will be put right. There is nothing that assists us in the crises of life like hope. Any surgeon will tell you that hope is half the battle in an operation. The majority of the collapses that take place under surgical operations are nervous collapses. Set your hope on coming through and on a cleaner and healthier life afterwards, and it is quite half the battle. It sustains the soul through weary days. It is the sunshine upon the landscape of life.

Now come to the specific hope—"the hope of the gospel." Let us consider for a few minutes its nature and constituent elements, that we may learn whether we have been moved away from it.

We will not travel beyond the borders of this chapter in our consideration: there is quite enough here to indicate what are the characteristics of "the hope of the gospel."

1. First of all—this always in Paul's "gospel"—THE REDEMPTION OF THE WHOLE WORLD BY JESUS CHRIST, the reconciling, as ver. 20 has it, of all things unto God. If I were to travel beyond the borders of this chapter for a moment to the Epistle to the Romans I could show you that the light of this hope shone not only on the face of men but on the face of nature. We sometimes imagine that the problem of Nature "red in tooth and claw" has been discovered by the modern scientist or poet. It is not so. Paul was aware of it. He laid his ear to the ground and he caught the moaning and sobbing of pain and suffering, "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now," and his hope, "the hope of the gospel," embraces the creation. "The creation itself . . . shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the children of God." But chiefly "the hope of the gospel" embraces the redemption of mankind—every tribe, every race, every class, and every individual. You could not persuade Paul that any race was hopeless. The gospel was intended for all, for all Christ died, and the vision that he had was that of every knee bowing in the name of Jesus. And Paul, remember, was a far-travelled man, a man of wide experience, a man of deep and intimate knowledge. He knew the abysmal depravity, the unutterable filth and degradation of the pagan world. Some of his pictures of it almost make us shudder. And he believed that men would be raised and freed and cleansed, and he saw it being done.

Then he knew the invincible bigotry of the Jew. He knew that both Jew and Gentile scorned the doctrine of the Cross of Christ. He knew all the stubborn facts of human life; and he never lost the vision of the complete victory and reign of Jesus Christ. And mark you, the vision was none of Paul's making. It was not "Paul's opinion"; it was a revelation. His phrase is, "I delivered unto you that which also I received." The colours of his vision were not mixed out of the pigment of his own imagination. The vision was the creation within him of the Spirit of God.

And it is this unfulfilled vision that is handed down to us. I am not sure that our faith is not weakening, in some instances, in the world-wide triumph of Jesus Christ. There is an idea abroad of an amalgam of religions, in which Christ, Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed shall sit side by side in a kind of pantheon, dividing among themselves the government of men's souls; an idea that there will be a kind of eirenicon among the religions of the earth, and that Christianity shall surrender its world-wide claim. Well, it was never in the mind of Paul: one Lord, one faith, one Saviour was his creed. You and I must grasp his vision, and still sing with all our hearts:

> "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
> Does his successive journeys run;
> His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
> Till moons shall wax and wane no more."

That is the eternal purpose of God. It will never be defeated. Let it be the watchword of the Church. Inscribe it on your banner: "The whole wide world for Christ. Jesus Christ the light of every man that cometh into the world."

That is "the hope of the gospel"—the world-wide dominion of Jesus Christ, the reconciling of all things to God through Him.

2. The second constituent element in "the hope of the gospel" is the PERFECT GOODNESS OF ALL WHO BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST. In ver. 22 we have this: "To present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in His sight." That was the passion of Paul's heart. It is expressed again in the twenty-eighth verse: "Warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily." Mark the purpose and passion of Paul, not merely to get men to Christ but to make them like Christ. My brethren, I am a perfectionist in this sense—that I believe I shall one day be perfected into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. That miraculous transformation will certainly take place. Paul held that conviction if he held anything, and not for himself only but for the Church also. Crowded as it was with imperfect people, the Church was to become "a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but . . . holy and without blemish." In one of his letters to the Corinthians he brings some of the most appalling sins out from their hiding places, parades them before their eyes, and says, "Such were some of you: but ye were washed, ye were sanctified and made just in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God." Brethren, if the hope of personal holiness has faded out of your mind, pray God it may be renewed, for we have nothing if we have not character.

And, moreover, the hope that the Christian

religion will triumph over other faiths lies in its power to produce a superior type of character. It rests on what Jesus Christ can make of men. And a vital part of "the hope of the gospel" is our being perfected into the image of Jesus Christ. It is a perfectly scriptural hope. It is written, "Ye shall be holy, for I am holy." It is written, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." The word of our Lord, from whose word there is for us no appeal, is, "Be ye . . . perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." We professedly Christian people will accomplish next to nothing in the world apart from our personal goodness. We will never *do* more than we *are*, and the passion of every Christian should be the passion for goodness, for likeness to Christ, to "know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings." Here is a word that I want to leave with you, and again it is a word from which there is no appeal: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness"—which is really holiness—"for they shall be filled."

3. The third constituent element in "the hope of the gospel" is THE HOPE OF HEAVEN, "the inheritance of the saints in light," as this chapter has it, the felicity of the saints in the future life. And here I venture to suggest that modern Christians have experienced a considerable weakening in their hope during the last thirty or forty years. It was perhaps because the old preachers drew so much upon their fancy concerning the future life that there has been a recoil from it on the part of the modern preachers. If George Eliot came amongst us to-day she would not be able to sneer at the other-worldliness of Christian people. She might rebuke us for our *this*-worldliness. A

caricature of modern evangelism that some people have been pleased to draw before the world is that we are chiefly concerned with getting people to heaven. The truth is we are not concerned half enough. We are greatly concerned about making heaven on earth, and that is quite right; but that hope will not live healthily apart from the hope of heaven hereafter. I was brought up in a remote village in Northamptonshire, and I declare to you that heaven was as real to some of the Christians of the old-fashioned sort as Birmingham or London, or America, to which some of their sons went. And I am positive that their assurance was Scriptural. I remember how hard-handed labourers and their wives, people whose lives were spent in the routine of monotonous drudgery, had a light in their faces "that never was on land or sea," but was the reflection of the conviction wrought by the Spirit of God, as they sang, in the bitter wintry days, of the land

> "Where everlasting spring abides
> And never withering flowers."

These people confessed that they were pilgrims and sojourners and, strangers, and, whatever their inheritance was here, the bulk of it lay yonder. And it was with something of the scorn of the world which Macaulay says the Puritans had that they sang this verse of a great hymn on heaven:

> "Should earth against my soul engage
> Or hellish darts be hurled,
> Then I can smile at Satan's rage
> And face a frowning world."

The mischief is that the world to-day is not "a

frowning world." It is a smiling world. It comes to us with

> "Quips, and Cranks, and wanton Wiles,
> Nods, and Becks, and wreathèd Smiles,
> Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,
> And love to live in dimple sleek;
> Sport, that wrinkled Care derides,
> And Laughter holding both his sides."

And before you know it your boys are sucked away by it.

It is twenty years now since I was in the bedroom of a cottage in a village in England where lay an old-fashioned Christian, eighty-three years of age. He had had four restless nights and weary days. He did not know anybody was in the room, and he was saying over to himself:

> "There shall I bathe my weary soul
> In seas of heavenly rest,
> And not a wave of trouble roll
> Across my peaceful breast."

My brethren, I venture to say that we have lost something from the Christian hope if we have allowed our horizon to end with this life. To cherish the hope of a blessed immortality will make us not the worse Christians but better. It will make us more indifferent to the gauds of this world. It will make us less pagan in our conception of death, We are awfully pagan. Death is commonly a calamity to us. When it comes we say, "The worst has happened." The idea is pagan. In the New Testament death was a negligible quantity. God put His children to sleep, and they awoke in the presence of their beloved

Lord. "We know," they said, "that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened; not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now He that has wrought us for the self-same thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord." And "we are . . . willing rather to be absent from the body, and at home with the Lord." I pray God to revive in the heart of the Church this part of "the hope of the gospel."

These, then, are the three things I have brought before you as the vital elements in "the hope of the gospel": the redemption and reconciliation of the whole world to God by Jesus Christ; the hope of personal goodness; and the hope of a blessed immortality. Now what is the basis, the ground of this hope? Because there are few things more tragic in this world than the delusions and disappointments of men of too sanguine temperament. The ground of "the hope of the gospel" is Jesus Christ. And mark you, everything depends upon who Jesus Christ is. Is He one of ourselves with just a little more of the Divine in Him? Is He, according to the Colossian heresy, the last of a long series of attenuating emanations of the Deity touching humanity at last? Listen while I read to you Paul's opinion—or, rather, his revelation—

of Jesus Christ: "For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him: and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell." That is a stately and impressive procession of thought. And its teaching is that "the hope of the gospel" rests upon the unique nature and glory of the Son of God, who took into His heart the sin of mankind, and died for us. It is in Him that we have redemption. It is in Him that we have the hope of perfection. In Him who was raised from the dead is our hope of immortality. Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, in living contact with the soul of man, transforming it into His own image—that was the sure basis of Paul's hope: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." "I no longer live," he says, "Christ liveth in me." Paul saw all the contrary things. Of course he did, just as clearly as we see them. He was not blind. He never lived in a fool's paradise; but he saw this thing, and his hope was as an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, entering into that which was within the veil. And if this man could speak to us across the centuries—for he is just as much interested in the redemption of man now as he was then—he would say to us, "Be not moved away from the hope of the gospel."

You are tempted to move away. All sorts of expedients of another kind are offered to-day in place of the gospel, and we ministers are tempted

to clutch at them in these days of unremunerative labour. In this age of scepticism we are inclined to go elsewhere than to the gospel for our message. My brother, you are inclined to doubt the universal dominion of Jesus Christ; you are inclined to doubt the possibility of your own perfection; you are inclined to doubt the perfection of your people. All sorts of worldly and startling things appear in the habits and character of the members of your Churches. I say to you, "Be not moved away from the hope of the gospel." Be sure that what you have is the gospel and then cleave steadfastly to it. It is not merely the simple gospel. Though simple in one sense, it is immeasurably profound in another. Be sure that what you have is the truth in Jesus, and then go on hoping all things on the strength of it.

Some of you have seen G. F. Watts's symbolic picture of Hope. It is somewhat mysterious. It is not a person with a shining and radiant face, but a woman with bowed head sitting over the world, playing upon a harp with one string. All the other strings are broken. I do not quite know what it means except this, that when everything is gone, and the harp of life is left with only one string, and most people would throw it to the scrap heap, Hope plays upon it and gets music out of it. But I take leave to interpret its message in another way. There is no other hope for humanity save "the hope of the gospel." The other strings of the harp are broken, and some of them are not worth mending. Many of the high-sounding expedients that men have invented for healing the world's woes and ridding it of its sin have broken down—even in my time—they have not been equal to the strain

put upon them. The one string left for us is "the gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ."

My brethren, go on harping on the same string: Jesus Christ and Him crucified, the only hope of guilty and burdened men. Apply that to the whole range of life—domestic, commercial, political—the gospel of the redeeming sacrifice of the Son of God. Go on playing on the one string, for there is music in it that will charm the world ultimately away from all its foolish experiments, and it will discover that there is no way of redemption save through the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and the living energy of His Spirit. "Be not moved away from the hope of the gospel."

XXI

DE PROFUNDIS

"Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord."—PSALM CXXX. 1.

I CALL your attention to this whole Psalm. Nobody knows who wrote it. No name is signed on it. It is a Psalm which multitudes of men *could* have written. Like many of the Psalms, it is a record of deep spiritual experience, the experience of a soul in the depths. The Psalmists were often there, and out of the depths they testify. They tell us what they felt and how they acted. Many a man in the depths has read the Psalms with a feeling of great and blessed relief. He has been saved from despair as he has realized that other souls have been where he is and have lived through the experience. It might do us good to listen to the cry of men in the depths—us whose path is flooded with sunshine and whose spirits are bright and gay—to remember and to realize that there are still souls about us who are in the depths.

Here is language which would find an echo in some modern experience. "O my God, my soul is cast down within me." "My tears have been my meat day and night." That belongs not only

to somebody three thousand years ago, but to somebody yesterday and to-day.

Again, "My soul is smitten and withered like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread." "I watch and am alone, as a sparrow upon the house-top." "If I say I will forget my complaint, I will lay aside my trouble and comfort myself, I am afraid of all my sorrows. "He "sat down under a juniper-tree, and requested that he might die; saying, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." These are not experiences confined to ancient history. Depression of spirits is a modern complaint. It was not only before Christ that men cried, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The cry is heard to-day. It moans through some of your modern fiction. There are all sorts of people who are in the depths. Some of them may be here, and even if they are not it is well for us to know about it, and not to go on our way as if the world were a pleasure-garden and a place without a broken heart, or a broken hope, or a bitter soul.

Few ministers of the gospel go for a single week in the year without encountering people in the depths. "Troubles come," said a dejected soul to me a few days ago, "not in single spies but in battalions"; and they do into some lives.

Here are the kind of depths the people get into: they lose their position in business when they are past middle life, and nobody will look at a man with grey hairs upon him in commerce nowadays, and there are months of gloom. Or a man in the same case loses his position in the pastorate and at the same time sickness comes into his family. The partner of his labours breaks down in nerve and spirit. His children are still de-

pendent on him, and every door seems to be shut against him; all the bright days are behind him. There comes a period of commercial depression, and with that domestic affliction, and for months a man is battling in the trough of the wave, his hope strained and sapped. And they may come to any of us—such rough and dark times as the old Psalmists passed through when they said, "All Thy waves and Thy billows are gone over me," or, "Thou hast laid me in the place of darkness," or, "Lover and friend hast Thou put far from me." And we may well ask ourselves what we should feel and how we should act if such experiences came to us, what should we do if the dark shadow of sorrow and disappointment, or loss or death, or awful sin and shame which is worse than death, should fall upon our home and our children?

And these depths are not merely the experience of people who have suffered misfortune and loss. The millionaire gets into the depths. I have seen several quite recently, and they looked quite as sad as ordinary men. It was a millionaire who threw himself over the ship's side on the way to England from South Africa. It really is not in the power of money to keep sorrow away and gloom.

And the good man gets there, the good and brave man like Elijah and Moses and John Baptist and even St. Paul. And he cannot tell how he gets into the hands of Giant Despair, at what door spiritual depression comes in, nor precisely what it is that he fears. Sometimes it is a man's own sin, with its bitter and accusing memory, as it was, I think, in the case of the Psalmist. Sometimes it is the sin of others, or the set-back and failure of a good cause, the apparent futility of

earnest striving and faithful service. I question if there are any of us who carry great responsibilities who are not now and then seized and bound in the cell of depression and gloom. Perhaps, indeed, there may be somebody for whose sake I have been led to preach this sermon, down in the depths.

What is there that can be said about it; what can you say to a man who is down there, when you know that if you were where he is you would be as depressed as he is, and perhaps more? It is of no use telling him that misfortune is the common lot. You know how Tennyson expresses the impatience which people in trouble feel with platitudes:

> "'One writes that 'other friends remain,'
> 'That loss is common to the race,'
> And common is the commonplace
> And vacant chaff well meant for grain."

How can a man minister to a soul diseased, or pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow? There is no work more difficult, and it is poor comfort to say, as Shakespeare does, "Therein the patient must minister to himself."

What would you say to a man who is in the depths? What *would* you say? Perhaps you would say nothing; you would rather run a hundred miles in the opposite direction than meet with him: not through lack of feeling, but through sheer fear of his sorrows. But what would the Bible say? It is the sorrowful man's book. Half its treasures are treasures of darkness. Like the stars, they are only visible after the sun has set. If we knew it better or believed it more, surely it would be the key that

would open many a dungeon into which the soul falls. What does it say to begin with? I don't think this is a platitude. It says to the soul in the depths—crying: "Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow"—"The greatest souls that have ever lived have been where you are." It may be questioned whether there has ever existed a truly great soul on earth who has not been in the depths. You are in the greatest company. They have been in and they have come through. By the mercy of God and in His compassion for our race, the sorrows of the Son of Man have not been hidden from our gaze. Every time you meet at the communion table you commemorate the Infinite sorrow. There is something sacred about the depths. When you are in them you want to hide from curious eyes. But it is a part of the infinite grace of Christ that He has for the sake of His people uncovered His pierced heart to His disciples and allowed them to see Him in the depths. You hear Him say, "Now is My soul troubled," and then "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me." The veil is drawn aside and you are permitted to see the agony of His soul at the prospect of His desertion by man and God. He has sounded the deepest depths—He, the beloved Son, perfect in character and in obedience. I think if I were in the depths I would try to think of that, and I know that the thought of it has brought comfort to many a soul.

The second thing that the Bible says and that this Psalm says, and that the great examples say, is that a man should cry to God. Here is the language: "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee." "O my God, my soul is cast down within

me, therefore will I remember Thee." "I will say unto God my rock, Why hast Thou forgotten me, why go I mourning all the day?" "How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord, for ever? How long wilt Thou hide Thyself from me?" What are these? Examples of prayer, and, mark you, not always prayers of trust; some are prayers of remonstrance or prayers of complaint. If a man cannot pray anything but a prayer of complaint and doubt, still let him pray. It is far better, as John Kelman says, that a man should say things to God in the bitterness of his soul than that he should say bitter things about God to others. If a man thinks that God has not treated him fairly, it is better that he should have the frankness and courage to say that in his prayer, than that he should say it to somebody, or write it in a newspaper. Many a man has to fight out the battles of his soul on his knees. If you do not like platitudes in your sorrows, do not use them in your prayers. The Old Testament saints were exceedingly candid in their prayers. They complained and rebelled and expostulated, and I cannot remember that God is ever represented as being angry with them, as our Lord is never angry with the questions or doubts of His disciples. They open the door to some of His greatest teaching. If a man can only murmur and rebel in his prayers, still let him pray. Never allow a grievance against God to cast the sullen shadow of silence over your soul. If you have had a bad day in business, pray about it. If only the son who has got a grievance against his father would go to his father about it instead of hiding it up sullenly and defiantly in his heart, or whispering it as a secret to some other ear, the grievance might

soon be remedied or be seen to be no grievance at all. And if only we would cling to the habit of bringing everything to God in our prayers, even our surprise and our distrust, much bitterness might be spared. "Being in an agony, He prayed."

The third thing that this Psalm suggests is that when a man is in the depths he should wait for God. That is an expression worthy to be considered. It means more than passivity, more than fatalistically accepting the universe, on the one hand, and on the other it means more than an eager cry. It means that a man calls, and then waits for the answer, waits and waits through a long delay with intense longing and yet with possession of soul. The strength and intensity of the attitude is described amply in this Psalm: "I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning." Who watched for the morning in the Psalmist's day? Men lost in the desert or among the hills, or beleaguered in the city and imperilled on the tented field, or by the bed of the sick man. The morning meant light, the arrival of help, the departure of the danger of wild beasts, the fleeing away of horror. So, "My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning." If you have ever watched and longed for the breaking of the day you know what intensity of longing is pressed into this expression. It is longing for that which is sure to come, and yet which seems as if it never will come; for that which will, at any rate, bring a change, and may make the situation tolerable at least.

You see the precise nature of the Psalmist's

longing—it is for God. It is once more the longing of the forty-second Psalm: "My soul thirsteth for *God*, for the *living God*." Or of the eighty-fourth Psalm: "My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God." I suppose the soul has lost the consciousness of God, and if that should be restored, why, the depths would be tolerable.

> "In darkest shades if Thou appear
> My dawning is begun,
> Thou art my soul's bright morning star,
> And Thou my rising sun."

Let me know that God *is*, that He is good, that He is near, that He loves me, and I can bear anything: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." That was often the attitude of the Old Testament saint. It was the attitude of Moses. Really he said, "I cannot go on with this work, I cannot carry this great burden, unless I get a revelation, an assurance, a consciousness that God is with me, and unless I know His name." And the revelation came. He may be said to have been the only man on earth at that time who had a clear conception of the goodness and mercy of God: "He endured as seeing Him who is invisible." And it was this that the Psalmist longed for. He is troubled by his sin. That may have helped to create the depths. But he believed that with the coming of God there would be the pronouncement of forgiveness, for there was "mercy and plenteous redemption" with God.

There is a further word to be said, viz., that the Bible abounds with promises and assurances and examples of the value and the fruit of waiting *upon* and waiting *for* God. Here is a statement:

"The Lord is good to them that wait for Him." The goodness of God appears to them that do not break away and become reckless with their lives, but who wait on and hold on. There comes some revelation of the uses of adversity to the man who waits. He comes to see that there are lessons to be learnt in the depths which can be learnt nowhere else—lessons of human frailty and folly, lessons of Divine goodness and grace. A man learns that God is the God of the depths as well as of the heights, that He formed the light and created the darkness, and that there are treasures that only the darkness can yield or reveal. Anyhow, here is the consciousness of this Psalmist. He is in the depths, and he cries to God and waits for Him, which means—there is no place in which any man can be in which he is inaccessible to God. He may be in the very lowest depths of sin and misery. You know what another Psalmist says: "If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee; . . . the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee." "If I make my bed in hell," and that is where some men have made their bed by their sin and folly (for a man makes his own hell or heaven)—"if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there," and if He is there, what is He there for? What does God's presence mean? Not merely condemnation, destruction, else why should this man cry out for it? It meant, as it may mean for every penitent and sincere soul, peace or strength or deliverance. I quoted a promise just now. Let me quote an experience, the experience of King Hezekiah: "On my peace there came great bitterness, but Thou hast loved my soul out of the pit of corruption, for Thou hast

cast all my sins behind my back." There is another testimony: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto my God." You see what you have there. It is the completion of the story of this Psalm. A man in the depths crying and waiting patiently, and then lifted from the depths to the heights by the grace and power of God.

And now, my friends, do all these things mean nothing? If they are not real they are not worth the paper they are printed on, and the best men the world has ever seen have been living in the midst of the grossest delusions, and the Psalms are just the vapourings of deluded minds. Well, we know that it is not so, that they are the record of real experience, that there are no depths into which any man can fall in which God cannot visit him, and out of which he cannot be redeemed. We have a far surer word of testimony than that which the Psalmist says that he hoped in, and to that we may continually resort as to a light shining in a squalid place. Jesus Christ has come, and in His life of perfect obedience and His Cross and Sacrifice we see surely what God is. We see also how sure is His help. Since He went into the depths a million things have happened. And I turn to the words of a great soul who loved Him much and who served Him faithfully, who knew both the depths and the heights, and who knew that the Lord was with him in both. These are the words he gave us: "If God be for us"—and there was no doubt about it—"who can be

against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword?" There is the army drawn up in dark array. "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

XXII

THE ELDER SON

"But as soon as this thy son was come, who hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf."—LUKE xv. 30.

IT may be fairly questioned whether in the whole of the New Testament you can find a more ungracious speech than this, or whether our Lord ever drew a more unattractive character than that of the man who made it.

It is not at all clear that the speech is entirely true of the prodigal, and at any rate it places the worst possible construction on his conduct and says the worst that can be said against him. Indeed, the speech seems to be a deliberate repudiation of his brother on the part of the elder son, and an insulting rebuke to his father. This is what it seems to say: "This vile creature, whom you have thought fit to receive with love and honour instead of sending him back to the swine, is not my brother. He is your precious son, and you are welcome to one another." It is, as we have said, a most ungracious speech from the lips of one of the most unlovable characters in all the portrait gallery of our Lord. And yet when one has said that, he is inclined to take it back again.

For there are so many admirable qualities in this man and in the type he represents. Home-staying, industrious, virtuous, honourable; steady, straight, thrifty, absolutely reliable, carrying everything through that he undertakes, keeping his honour bright and his name unstained. Hard at a bargain, maybe, and an exacting employer, but true to his word, perfectly just and upright; owing no man anything and never sparing himself in work. These are qualities in which we ought to rejoice. Happily they are to be found abundantly in our Free Church life. They are, to a great extent, the product of it.

And yet you feel that this man who is the embodiment of these excellent virtues is a failure. He does not attract you; he repels you rather. You see the other wretched wastrel coming back home. You realize something of the anxiety and shame that he has brought to the home, and how, like the moral idiot that he is, he has flung away the jewel of his own good name and his father's love and been guilty of folly, from the consequences of which he can never recover; and yet you almost prefer him to this churlish person who stands there denouncing him and praising himself, complaining of and blaming his father in an outburst of petulant anger.

And this is the man whom we are bound to look at. It was to him and his type that the parable was spoken. Not to the prodigal who has given the parable its name. It has been blessed to more prodigals than we can number. Read in their hearing, or repeated, it has saved them in the hour of their remorse and their despair; but it was not spoken to them. It is not the message of Jesus to the outsider, the

morally or ecclesiastically outcast, the morally foolish and wicked. The whole group of these three parables, which are really three phases of one parable, are addressed to the Church. They are the defence of Jesus against the contemptuous charge of the Church. They are His apology for loving the sinful and welcoming the lost. They are intended to set His conduct in the light of entire reasonableness. They are intended to show the utter unreasonableness and unloveliness of the attitude of the Pharisees. And they are intended to show God's attitude towards *them* in their self-righteous complaining.

Let us think of these three things in order.

I

First, our Lord sets before them His relation and attitude to the low and the lost, the moral outsider, the conventionally or really irreligious people, and the very worst people. Do not let any one of us fall into the delusion that the conduct of the prodigal is *per se* to be placed for a moment on a level with that of the elder son. It is as inferior to it as darkness to light. He has lost that which can never be recovered, and gathered memories that will always be an accusing agony. With all the father's grace he can never say to him what he says to his elder son: "Thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine." Say the best you can about the prodigal, it can never be the same with him as if he had never left his father's side. And there is no excuse to be made, save indeed—if we let our imagination run on the story—that the elder son was ill to live with, irritating beyond endurance.

Here is the point common to the three illustrations that make up the one parable. Here is the word used of creature, and thing, and person —*they are lost.* Not they will be, but they *are.* It is a word with infinite pathos in it. It is a word which is not to be dropped from the preacher's vocabulary. Whatever may be the ultimate fate of many of the men and women about you, here is the present fact to be burnt into the preacher's mind as it glowed in the consciousness of our Lord—*they are lost.* Whether through their own fault and folly, like the sheep and the son, or through somebody else's fault and carelessness, like the coin, *they are lost.* They may be like the coin and the sheep, not doing any great harm, but they are in peril of *getting* harm, and at the moment they are a-missing. The coin is out of circulation. It is not fulfilling the purpose for which it was made. It is being wasted. It is in danger of being cast as rubbish to the void. Without pressing the figurative word of Christ to its uttermost limit, you can apply it to human life. Passion, enthusiasm, love, power of brain and body and heart, are being wasted. Life is running to waste. It is lost.

And you cannot be true to the parable unless you see that the word "lost" implies an owner. Some one has lost the sheep, the coin, the lad; and the unmistakable inference is that if men are lost, God has lost them. They are His lost property.

Our Lord never shrinks from anthropomorphism. He continually causes us to think of God in terms of humanity, and by the stories of this chapter you are compelled to think of the pain and the joy of God.

Here is what you see in the stories so absolutely true to human life: that which is lost becomes immediately the chief concern of the loser. It gets on his nerves. It fills his mind and his heart. It is the one thing gone out of the set, so making it incomplete, that troubles you. It is the child that has not returned at the proper time, that has strayed into the street or the park and has not come back, that fills the mind of the mother with an agony of solicitude. It is a useless mockery at the moment for you to try to comfort or quiet her by telling her of those that are safely by her side. She is almost oblivious of these in her pain and anxiety, and after that one she will go forth. It is the lad who is gone; whose bed was found empty, unslept in, one morning, who fills the mind of his father almost to the exclusion of the rest.

And the other thing is that the moment a thing is lost it acquires in the mind of the loser a special value. All its preciousness in fact and in possibility is made to stand out more vividly by the loss of it. You never knew how precious it was till it was gone. Now, my brethren, you will see that by means of these stories our Lord places His own ministry in the light of uttermost reason. He seems to say to these murmuring critics, "So far from complaining, you should feel that I am doing the only thing that can be done. These people are God's lost property, and I am come to recover them." "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost." That is His errand here, His Father's business that He has come to do. You may think of God in terms of humanity. If there is pain when a sheep or a coin is lost, and joy when it is recovered; pain when a lad leaves his

home, and bliss when he returns; if all *that* is natural and reasonable, should you not rejoice, and not murmur, when some one comes to recover men and restore them to God?

And this other lesson, my brethren, to be burnt into the mind and heart of the Church, *that lost men are the chief concern of God.* Men who are not fulfilling their destiny, whose powers are asleep, whose faculties are perverted and prostituted, whose enthusiasm is wasted, whose love is degraded, whose tastes are depraved, whose souls are dead. These are on the Divine Heart an almost insupportable burden and pain, and they ought to be a perpetual burden on the heart of the Church, and their recovery a passion in the heart of the ministry.

II

Now, secondly, note. Our Lord sets before these men *their attitude* to lost people; and we have to see whether there is anything for us in the picture. The Pharisee in the original type was a very excellent man. He was a separatist so far as the world was concerned. He would never under any conditions have accepted office under the Roman Government. He would never have participated in the vices of the Roman world. He stood originally for strict morality, virtue, and religion. Perhaps at his best he was the prototype of the Free Churchman of to-day—a man of high moral principle and strict rectitude; a man who is profoundly interested in the ordinances of religion, and who gives largely to their effective maintenance. The Pharisee in the time of our Lord was a degenerate; he had been conquered by the defects of his qualities.

And these defects are very clearly marked in the portrait of the elder son. They are defects against which moral and respectable virtuous and religious people, such as compose to-day the bulk of our Churches, have to watch with ceaseless vigilance. And they are—

1. A complete loss of love towards such people as Christ came to seek. You see that in the elder son. There is anger and shame that anybody connected with him should so have disgraced himself; a certain amount of mortified pride and indignation; a shocked propriety, a considerable amount of contempt; but no care, no pity, no love, and no hope. He would have accepted his father's definition of his brother: "DEAD—LOST." The difference between him and his father was here. He had no hope that his brother would ever be anything else; and if the truth must be spoken, no desire. The prodigal was an abandoned and hopeless character. When anybody had gone as far as that, he must be *allowed* to go finally. His name should never be mentioned. It was a crowning mercy that his brother did not see him before his father. He would have had him driven off the estate. It was a perplexity and a pain, and not a joy, that he had turned up again.

But there is one of the temptations and tendencies of moral and virtuous and religious people. Thank God that it is frequently conquered, but it is there. Think if it is not so. Ask the strenuous worker, who utilizes every hour, what he thinks of the idler who wastes half his time and shirks half his duties! Ask the man who has lived on the high principle that he will owe no man anything, his opinion of the man who never pays anybody till he is compelled. Ask the man of

clean heart and lips what he thinks of the unclean beast who defiles his imaginations with vile thoughts and his body with evil words and deeds! And the danger is that the horror and loathing and contempt that you feel for the sin should drive out of your heart hope and care and love for the sinner.

The situation is full of subtle difficulties. You are afraid of lending any countenance to the sin —of lightening its gravity in the smallest degree. And what you are in danger of is allowing the lost man to remain lost; of losing not only care for him, but interest in him; of letting your heart be possessed of scorn or contempt or indifference— and they are none of them Christian qualities. I declare to you my conviction that one of the gravest perils of the Church of to-day is the entire lack of passionate solicitude for the recovery and salvation of the lost.

(2) The other clearly marked defect of morally upright and righteous people is self-complacency, as shown in this parable, a conscious superiority. You see this man standing and praising himself, scorning his brother and complaining that *he* has never received his deserts, and in him, as in the man in the other parable who paraded his virtues in his prayer in the temple, thanking God that he was not as the rest of men—you see how possible it is for the glow of indignation respecting somebody else's failings to pass into the glow of smug satisfaction at our own moral condition and achievements, to hold ourselves up to our own admiration and the admiration of others.

There is such a thing possible as *unctuous rectitude*. Then what is wrong is not the rectitude

but the unctuousness, which spoils it. What is wrong about this man is not his staying at home and obeying his father's wishes, but the spirit in which he did this. A half-grudging spirit, clearly. Expecting to be rewarded for serving his father as though he owed him no debt, as though his father had not served him through the whole of his helpless years; as though his father's roof had not sheltered him, nor his wealth enriched him; as though he owed his father nothing and had a right to expect to be paid over again. What you get is a man proud of his virtue, proud of his morality. And you may find such people to-day proud of their industry and flaunting it in your face, flourishing the fact that they pay twenty shillings in the pound, as though that were the richest fruit that could be expected to grow on the tree of human life. In the expressive phrase of St. Paul, "puffed up." Spoiling what is really good by moral vanity and spiritual pride. Failing to see that not a single being living has anything to boast about; for all we have, even the strength to attain to virtue, is the gift of God, to whom we are irrecoverably in debt. *There* was the wrong about the old-time Pharisee. Not his fasting and praying, but the ostentation, the obtrusive vain-glory and self-admiration which accompanied it.

It is always the peril. There is but a step between righteousness and self-righteousness, between moral achievement and moral pride and disdain. Let us beware and watch carefully lest that fatal step be taken, a step which separates us from our fellow-men, and, in our own estimation, lifts us up into a position of fancied superiority beyond their reach and out of sympathy with them,

and out of influence over them in their weakness and need and worthlessness.

III

Thirdly, I call your attention to God's attitude to the moral and virtuous and religious man who is spoiling everything by his proud and loveless spirit.

We have often admired the abounding grace shown to the prodigal. The grace manifested to the elder son is no less wonderful, though we are rather inclined to resent it. It seems so perfectly undeserved.

We can all see his defect, his sordid conception of his relation to his father—his absolute failure to sympathize with his father or even to understand him.

We can all see what would have pleased the father in this story and have made his heart to leap for gladness—viz., if this son, proud of his formal obedience, regarding his conduct as immaculate, had said to him one night when the house was still and he was about to retire to his couch on which he lay without sleeping, "Father, I see that you are breaking your heart about my brother. I am grieving about him too. The hired servants can do the work about the estate. Now, for the love I and you bear him, let me start out to search for him and to bring him back, lest he perish." That would have been more acceptable than years of service which, after all, slaves could perform. There was the missing note in the elder son. It was not only that he had no love for his brother, he had none for his father. It was entirely lacking in his service.

And, my brethren, a man can be so lifted up in pride at his own character and conduct as to come to think that even God is in his debt.

I am disposed to think that in some respects the most pathetic figure in the story is the father —failing with both his sons, failing to inspire them with the filial spirit, to create love for him in their hearts, to impress them with his own spirit. He moves through the story, a solitary figure, with a heart full of love which has no return.

In so far as this is a human story it reflects the pathos and even the tragedy of many a home. In so far as it sets forth the Divine Father, it reflects a moral twist in human nature which is one of the deepest mysteries of our existence.

And, my brethren, I remind you again that this is Christ's parable not to the outsider, the prodigal, but to the Church on the subject of the outsider. And one great point in the story is that God stands by our side entreating us; that He grieves over us; that His trouble with us is our lack of trouble about our brother in heathen lands or this land. We must be more severe in our judgment of ourselves than any critic can be, and I think we would be bound to confess that under our present Free Church system our energies are not bent towards seeking and saving the lost.

There are Churches absolutely destitute of any passion in this direction. There are multitudes of our Church members who don't care. They never give a thought to the subject. They belong to a Church as they belong to a club. They pay their seat subscription, they expect their place reserved, they go to hear their favourite preacher, and it ends there; or they find pleasant and agreeable

society in the Church, and it ends there; there is nothing else, no sighs, no tears, no sorrow for the lost, no effort to save them.

The Church as an institution, instead of being a watch-tower for the prodigal, or banqueting-chamber into which the people can be swept from the streets and lanes, the highways and hedges, is fast becoming a close preserve, a resort of the favoured minority among our population, who have no hope of the majority and little interest in them.

The question was asked in a little ministerial society to which I have the honour to belong, Why do we not get the publican and the sinner? Why do not the people who have lost their chances and their souls draw near to us as they did to Christ? Why not indeed? What about the great multitude that crowd to the race-course and the music-hall and the public-house? What about the people in the mean and dreary streets of our great cities, out of whose life all religion seems to have died—a vast crowd to whom the *names* even of our most popular preachers are unknown? What about the wretched and miserable poor in our slums whose life is a ceaseless and hardening struggle with privation and hardship?

These are the sort of people who drew near to Jesus, as well as the Magdalens, the abandoned, the outcast, the people whom everybody thought as lost. But they don't draw near to us, the gulf between us and them is an ever-widening one. We are losing and not gaining. So far from breaking up new ground and winning new conquests, we are a narrowing and shrinking influence. London adds, roughly speaking, 100,000

to her population every year, and your Church membership adds practically nothing.

The question becomes urgent. It is vital to our very existence. We might even drop politics, with all their thrilling excitement, to consider it. Why do not these people draw near to us? Is it because there is something radically wrong in our Church arrangements? or because there is too much of the elder son in our Churches? Would they ever have drawn near to our Lord if He had been shut up in a modern church with its proprietary rights in pews and ministry, with strangers kept standing on the mat until the favoured members, who seem to own the whole concern, including the preacher, are comfortably settled? We are doing much, we are keeping ourselves moral and respectable and virtuous. We are taking care of our own young people. But, my brethren, we are not saving the lost, and the question is why we are not. Are we likely to do it with our present methods?

I heard one of our most highly esteemed ministers say not long since that there is a rescue home in the neighbourhood of his Church, and its inmates are brought to its services. "And," said he, "these poor creatures are converted. In many instances the sermon that goes over the heads of the moral and cultured people goes to the hearts of these and becomes the germ of a new life." Why do we not get these people? How can we get them? Perhaps we shall have to break up and modify our existing system, which is cumbersome and ineffective. Perhaps we shall have to find ways of going to these people and not waiting for them to come to us; perhaps some of our greatest preachers will have to take to

street preaching. Perhaps we who have much of this world's good and have even been enriched by the Church shall be compelled to sacrifice a great deal more than we have ever done, that poor people may have the gospel without charge. What is required most of all is that we shall come *to see the infinite worth of a human soul*, that every man is God's child; that the regal business of the Church is to recover God's lost property; that the royal occasions of the Church are when lost men are saved. And the bottom question is, Do we care? Have we any passion in this direction?

For as I read this story I gather from it that God not only grieves over the vice of the prodigal but over the fault of the elder son. That it is not only the prodigal who needs to repent, but the man in the Church, the preacher, the official, the righteous person who is apt to think that he needs no repentance. He has failed, failed miserably, and failed in the cardinal matter, which is love—sacrificial and self-forgetting—to God and man. We need to repent, my brethren, of our self-complacency and pride, our indifference and hardness. We need to humble ourselves at the feet of God and to seek forgiveness for our lack of sympathy with our Lord, and to pray that He will kindle afresh in us a passion which will find ways of expressing itself for the recovery and salvation of the men and women for whom He died. There would be joy in the presence of the angels of God to-night if we, who have strayed from our Master's spirit into officialism, were brought back again. If we who have never sought to save men, who have had no mind above statistics and finances, were brought to the feet

of our Lord, crying for forgiveness for our lack of love, and praying to be sent forth, to be permitted the high honour of being fellow-labourers, fellow-shepherds, with our Master in seeking and saving that which is lost.

XXIII

HIDDEN LIFE

"Your life is hid with Christ in God."—COLOSSIANS iii. 3.

THERE is no truer word than the first part of my text—"your life is hid." Nobody has seen life. All that we see is the phenomena, the manifestations of life; its innermost secrets no one save God has penetrated. And of nothing is that more true than of human life as it is contained in human personality. There are great things that we have in common, so that if a preacher deal with his own needs and experiences he will be sure thereby to get at the needs and experiences of others. There is a sense in which we are all akin, so that he who knows himself knows something of others. But it is also true that we differ—that as there are no two faces alike of all the millions on the face of the globe, so there are no two souls alike. There is something distinct and exclusive in every personality. Tennyson describes the developing infant thus—

"So rounds he to a separate mind,"

and there is nothing more certain than this separateness. It becomes more and more clear

as life goes on, we individuals are islands in a great sea; some of us are more remote and inaccessible than others, but each one in some deep respect separate and distinct.

Science tells us that even in the most solid mass of matter no two atoms touch each other, and that is true in a certain measure of human souls.

Nobody has penetrated to the full secret of your life. Nobody knows you clearly and fully. There is nobody whom you fully know. You can go a certain distance, and then you come to a barrier, beyond that *the life is hid.*

You would think that a mother would know her child, but she does not save in part, though in this as in all other relationships some are simpler and more easily known than others, but with all of us there is a point beyond which you cannot penetrate; the life is hid.

You would think that the husband would know the wife and the wife the husband, but they do not. They live side by side for years. In many things they understand each other, but even in the happiest married life—and there is much of married life that is unhappy—there is a mystery surrounding the separate personality, some point on which a stranger will understand husband or wife better than each understands the other.

It is not a question just now of *trying* to conceal your real life and your real self from others. That, of course, may be done. There are people who wear a mask—who want to be secretive. There are people about whom you feel that they are hiding themselves, withdrawing into their own impenetrable reserve. They do not wish to be known, as there are others who do not wish

their real self, their motive and intention, to be known. They seem to be one thing, they are really another, and you speak of them as "deep" or "plausible." You distrust them because you feel that they are acting a part; you cannot fathom them. It is another person and not the real self that is dealing with you.

Just now, however, it is not a question of trying to hide your life, it is a matter of asserting that it *is* hid in some important respects.

It may be a question of incapacity to make ourselves known, which is a fact in many cases and relationships. Indeed, it is one of our troubles, and often an essential part of our pain, that we cannot make ourselves understood.

It may be questioned whether you have ever told anybody all that is in your heart, even if you be the most ingenuous and candid person. It may be your trouble and your pain that you cannot speak of the things that are most real to you, even among the people who love you best. You simply cannot disclose your inmost thoughts and desires and convictions. It would be like exposing a hothouse plant to the atmosphere of a frosty night. There is many a man who in the innermost soul of him is a stranger in his own intimate circle, and not because he wishes to be but he is driven into it. He is compelled to a solitary life. To speak about the things that are dearest to him would be to talk a foreign language to these people. He has found that out by experience, and now he is silent. He cherishes his thoughts alone. His life is hid.

And it is not only in things that are dear, but also in things that trouble you, things in your own life,

that distress and burden you, that you would fain reveal yourself to those immediately about you. If you did there would be disagreement, misunderstanding may be censure or scoffing; and for peace' sake, to avoid irritation or to avoid giving pain, you shrink into yourself and close the door.

You can live under the same roof with people, and the most intimate relation may exist between you, so far as flesh and blood are concerned, and yet you may be perfect strangers to each other in the deepest things and may be living in perfectly different worlds.

Is not one of the facts of personality this, that you need a certain atmosphere in which to make yourself known—a sympathetic atmosphere—as the flower needs sunshine to unfold itself?

There are things concerning yourself that you cannot disclose to certain people, not because they are wrong. You know that they are right, but they would be misused; the revelation would do harm and not good. If you felt moved to speak of them at all, you would speak half apologetically, or with an effort to justify yourself. To other people these would be the very first things that you would speak about fully, frankly, almost boastingly.

And the question that it occurs to me to ask is, Does not this condition of things shed some light on the power of God to reveal Himself to man? Does it not seem to you that the revelation of the personality and nature of God must depend in great measure on the capacity of man? What you are capable of receiving and what you are willing to receive, that you *do* receive, and only that. It is perfectly clear to any reader of the

New Testament that our Lord was baffled constantly in His attempts to make Himself known by the dullness of His disciples, to say nothing of the animosity of His foes; and at the very end one of the troubled words that broke from His lips was, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?" You may say with truth that His whole intercourse with the Twelve was an attempt to make Himself known, which was only partially successful. His life was hid. A profound mystery to His best friends. In solitude He lived it. Loving intensely and longing for the fellowship of His own intimate followers, He was yet compelled to live His life apart. And in our measure it is true of all of us. Think of Jacob with his children, Moses with his people, Elijah and Isaiah and all the great prophets. What strikes you about them is that they are living an unshared life, and that save for a very narrow margin of their experience they are alone.

What shall we say about this? Surely this. No man should try to live a hidden life, to keep himself aloof and apart, especially from those dear to him. Children should not withhold their confidence from their parents nor endeavour to live a life in the dark. It is treating them unfairly, and generally the results are disastrous. Nobody should wear a mask, labouring to hide his real motive and intention, pretending to be what he is not.

But we must accept the fact of a certain amount of solitude as an inevitable fact of human experience. You are not made like other people, and they will never be like you. You have really to bear the burden of your own individuality. You

have your own destiny to achieve, your own character to form, and you will have to bear the consequences of your own actions. No one can possibly bear them for you. And we must be patient and charitable towards others. We must respect their personality. We have to say frankly that we cannot understand them, that they are a puzzle to us. We are quite within our rights in reasoning with them, in endeavouring to persuade them, to convince them, to win them. We have no right to treat them with contempt or to denounce them because they do not see things with our eyes. They may have eyes of their own which see things from a different angle.

It is quite remarkable how really good people differ in opinion and judgment, and how they misunderstand each other, and how misunderstanding leads to bitterness. Sometimes they have not the capacity to understand each other. Each to the other is peculiar. They are cast in perfectly different moulds. They could never be alike. There is no reason why they should attempt to be. God made them different to serve a different purpose. There is still less reason why bitterness should arise out of the difference. Let it be acknowledged as a part of God's order. Let us be careful of forming judgments. You say you have reckoned a man up. You did it long ago. You pride yourself on your discernment of character. Your reckoning may be wrong, as human reckonings have often been. There is something that you cannot see. A hidden life to whose excellences you are blind. How often a man's own age, or the "knowing" people of his age, fail to understand him. John Bunyan is sent to jail as a schismatic at the instigation of the

Church of England. He is told by three English judges that his divinely ordained calling is the mending of pots and pans, and that his other work is of the devil. The Church of England of to-day, to its honour, receives at the hands of a Baptist—a member of Bunyan's own communion—a memorial window placed in Westminster Abbey, and acknowledges by the lips of the Dean of Westminster Bunyan's immortal genius, and his undoubted position among the illustrious religious teachers and guides whom God has raised up in this and other lands.

But what shall we say of this hidden life as it relates to our own selves? Let this be said: you know it as no one else can, or you may know it and should seek to know it—its loves and hates, its hopes and fears, its motives and ambitions.

It may be true that involuntarily you reveal yourself in some things to others, so that they can see what you are more clearly than you can. But after all there is your hidden life, which no one can see as you can see it. Your own individuality as God fashioned it, lying all clear in His holy sight, Who searches the thoughts and intents of your heart.

What shall I do with this strange life of mine, I who find myself differing in taste and temperament from people about me, I who find weariness in their amusements and whose meat is their poison? And what shall I do—who cannot speak the innermost thoughts of my heart, who have nobody to share my ambitions and aspirations, nobody who understands how I struggle and pray against my besetments or how I long for a better and worthier life, with a longing with which no one credits me? What am I to do with this

personality with which God has endowed me, and who find myself at variance with many of the people about me? Shall I labour to bring my life into accord with theirs; to tame down its colours to blend with theirs? What shall I do with these thoughts and experiences which I long to confide in others and yet cannot?

In answer to all these questions, brethren, can anything better be said than, to use the words of St. Paul: "Let your life be hid with Christ in God"?

There in the secret places of your own thoughts and desires, which no human eye can pierce, welcome Him. Seek His face. Never try to live without Him. Dare to offer the old prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart."

In those repressed desires, those longings after a different life, which would find no sympathy in human ears and no echo and response, allow yourself to be driven back upon God. Try to realize Him. Pour out your hearts to Him. It is the teaching of the example of the solitary Son of God. Night after night He poured out His heart in prayer (what a refuge and anchorage it is to the solitary soul, preserving it from cynicism and despair or hopeless levity), and towards the end He could say calmly to His uncomprehending friends, "Ye shall forsake Me and leave Me alone, and yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me."

My brother and sister, your life is hid. You are the man or the woman with a secret care, a secret burden, a secret ambition, a secret disappointment. Take Christ into your confidence to-day. Tell Him your burden. Believe in the old word as though He were speaking it: "Come unto *Me*, and

I will give you rest." You cannot carry this burden alone, and you will go wrong with it. Bring it to Him. Live your life with Him; because to Him you are responsible, to Him you must render up your account. It is His purpose you are here to achieve. Something original He may have to strike out from your life.

You may dare to live the solitary life in His Divine companionship. He is the great friend for the solitary way. You will never go wrong in your thinking or desiring or planning if you have Him as your helper and guide and friend. You may have a life that is *hid with the devil.* The fires of deadly hatred and envy and degrading lust burn and are nourished in secret. They make the heart a hell in time, and personal existence a burden too great to be borne. To have a life that is hid in Christ is to have a fountain in every desert, a branch of healing by every bitter spring, a sure comfort in every grief. So, once more, let your life be hid with Christ in God.

XXIV

OUTWARD OR INWARD

"One of His disciples saith unto Him, Master, behold, what manner of stones and what manner of buildings! And Jesus said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left here one stone upon another, which shall not be thrown down."—MARK xiii. 1, 2 (R.V.).

THE incident brought before us in these verses took place between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, in what is called now Holy Week—the saddest week in the whole life of our Lord. He was coming out of the Temple with His disciples, and one of them—perhaps the mouthpiece of the rest—was moved to profound admiration at the splendour of the building which they were just leaving. I suppose it was one of the most wonderful and beautiful buildings in the world. The site on which it stood was superb. It was the third Temple that had stood there, and the most magnificent of them all. For forty-six years an army of workmen had been engaged in its erection and adornment, and it had not long been completed. Within that costly shrine the Jew believed the Most High still held His court, and that in the holiest of all He still could be immediately approached. All the spell of centuries of

religious history and sentiment rested on that spot. The Temple itself was a rare gem of architecture in a wondrous setting, a symbol of strength and beauty. Any Jew might have been forgiven his swelling pride as he contemplated it. He might even have been forgiven the thought that it would last for ever, that the religion which it enshrined would become universal, and that all the nations of the earth would come to worship and offer sacrifices there. Probably these were some of the feelings in the mind of the unnamed disciple as he broke out into admiration of the glory of the glittering pile.

It seems as if our Lord could not be infected with the same enthusiasm. Probably there was not so sad a city to Him in the whole of the Holy Land as Jerusalem, over which He had bitterly wept a day or two before. And the saddest place in Jerusalem was the Temple of Herod. It had been built by an altogether unworthy man far more for his own glory than for the glory of God. It had become a den of thieves, a place where men trafficked for gain, or sought their own ends and their own glory. And this is what He said of it to His admiring disciple. Its splendour is doomed. There is nothing here that is permanent. "There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down."

~~The saying~~ evidently made a deep impression on the minds of the disciples. A dismal prophecy it would seem to them, fitting into the sad mood of their Master during these days, a mood incomprehensible to them. It is a remarkable thing that what can fill one person with admiration can move another to infinite sadness. It depends on ~~your~~ the point of view and on ~~your~~ the standard of

measurement, and also on the condition of your soul whether your measurement be lateral or cubical, extensive or intensive, whether you look at the things that are seen or the things that are not seen. It is a very remarkable fact, of which ample illustration may be found in the New Testament, that something looked at from one point of view may appear eminently prosperous and flourishing, and from another point of view may be seen to be on the verge of collapse and of ruin.

Take the Temple. Probably it had never seemed to be more prosperous. Jerusalem was thronged with pilgrims, many of whom had made costly journeys to be present at its great festival. From far-off lands whither their trading propensities had led them, prosperous Jews had come to bring a proportion of their spoils to the Treasury. Probably the crowds were never greater nor the gifts richer. Never was the Sabbath more rigorously observed or the externals of religion more elaborately organized and carried through. Doubtless the machinery was perfect, and not a jot or tittle of the Levitical law concerning the Passover would be omitted.

But we know to-day that the whole thing was a failure. The true spirit and essence of religion was entirely misconceived. The Jews had a purely external and ceremonial conception, which is always the peril of an elaborate ritual and makes one afraid of it. Personally, I question whether splendid ecclesiastical structures and gorgeous ritual ever make for the preservation and development of the spiritual life, and whether the extreme simplicity of the Society of Friends does not better befit the genius of the Christian religion. At any

rate, it may be said that if there was one place in Jerusalem from which the Most High was absent it was the Temple.

Our Lord saw that vital religion was stifled and crushed by the weight of elaborate ceremonial that had been piled upon it. It is so perfectly true that you can kill religion by elaborate ritual; that incense and music and oratory can hide the face of Christ and drown His voice and become a sad substitute for grace, and even an obstacle instead of a medium; that you can go through a whole series of ritualistic performances without your life being affected for good.

And that was what was happening in Jerusalem. The Temple was always a sad place for Christ, the one place that made Him angry. Twice He attempted to cleanse it, but it was too corrupt to be cleansed. It was a splendid shell, but the kernel was rotten—a body it was out of which the spirit had fled. It may be questioned whether the Temple was of the slightest service to humanity, whether its officials who were maintained in comfort by its offerings had any sympathy towards the needy and sinful and suffering people of their time. It is scarcely possible to conceive of a severer condemnation than that passed indirectly on these people by our Lord in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Considering all this, we are not surprised that Jesus Christ could not join in the admiration of His disciple. His was another point of view. He saw beneath the surface, and saw that the Temple was an appalling failure. Instead of drawing weary and distressed souls to God, it seemed to be hindering and repelling them. There was neither love nor compassion in its courts, but a spirit of

pride and egoism, of greed and self-righteousness, and He could worship better under the olive-trees or the open sky on the hillside than there. The only thing that pleased Him in the Temple in this last week of His life was the thing that many would have despised, viz., the notable offering by the widow woman of all that she had. That was a gift of sacrificial love that moved the heart of the Lord.

But now let me ask, Which of these two standards are we disposed to apply to religion to-day? Is it not the external?—which, mark you, is always the passing—and is not the attitude of our Lord which is always characteristic of Him rather the attitude which we should earnestly cultivate, viz., that of looking beneath the form and the exterior to the life, the motive, the spirit? How do we too commonly measure religion to-day? Take the recent meetings of the National Free Church Council. More than on any occasion for many years the programme has been concerned with the things of the inner life of the Christian Church. And now the British public have been informed by the Press that the Council has not dealt with "live" subjects, and a section of the religious Press has indulged in the same complaint.

Again, what is our common definition of a strong and prosperous Church—numbers? wealth? abundant activity? I think it could be proved that they had all these in the Temple at Jerusalem, and it was a dead failure. Probably given a good building, in a good neighbourhood, and men with means, an interesting and eloquent speaker, excellent music and organization, and you could get the numbers and the wealth; but you might not have a really prosperous Church; you might not have

a Church at all in the truest sense. You might have no communion with God, no passion for holiness, and no Christian fellowship, and no compassion for the woes of men, and no evangelizing zeal, and no saving and sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit operating through the ministries.

There is nothing that I know of more instructive on this point than the letters to the Seven Churches in Asia. There you get the same Lord whose eyes pierced beneath the surface of religion in the Temple searching the interior life of the Churches and pronouncing His judgment. And it is most impressive to see how that judgment is in several instances precisely the reverse of the judgment both of the Church itself and of others. The most startling case is that of Laodicea, self-satisfied, saying, "I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." And you know His judgment: "Thou art wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." And there is Ephesus, orthodox, and crowded with activities, but with the fatal defect of lovelessness, its light threatened with extinction. Then there is Sardis, apparently strong and flourishing, so that people are talking about it enviously, and here is the word of Christ: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and thou art dead."

On the other hand, there is what would be called a small cause at Smyrna, crippled by poverty, struggling with difficulty, and here is its glorious assessment: "I know thy tribulation and thy poverty, but thou art rich." And I take it from my first and last illustration that it is possible to have more real life in a small and poor Church, more spiritual prosperity, more of Christian brotherhood and sympathy than in a large and

apparently prosperous community. I take it also that it is possible to be very busy about the wrong things, things that do not really matter and that only touch the surface, that make no real difference to either God or man. And it is possible also to be busy about the right things in the wrong spirit. Our Lord did not condemn fasting, much less did He condemn prayer; but He did emphatically condemn the spirit in which the Pharisees fasted and prayed. "I do not find it difficult to work," wrote Norman Macleod, who may be described as a glutton for work, "but I do find it very difficult to work in the right spirit." And, my friends, it is the spirit that counts, the spirit that animates you, the motive that prompts you, in Sunday-school teaching and preaching and giving. It is the spirit that lifts up or degrades, that sanctifies or secularizes wellnigh everything.

We have erected certain systems, and forms, and customs in religion, and we come to associate religion almost exclusively with them. Religion for some people does not exist outside the Roman Church, and for others outside the Anglican. For some people religion during this week will be abstaining from certain kinds of food, walking mournfully, and there may be real religious fervour in such observances. But there will be others who will neither fast nor wear mourning, and you must not deny religion to these, for they may be equally devout. Religion to some people is associated entirely with Episcopalianism, to others with Presbyterianism, and to others with the Congregational order. I am not going to suggest for a moment that the system is of no importance, but I do seriously suggest that it is not of the first importance. You can get a live

Church or a dead Church under any system. And the system is not the permanent thing. It will be modified as time passes on, or it will die. It will take to itself new forms and developments. Probably our systems will approximate more nearly to each other as time goes on, for they are none of them perfect, they are none of them of the essence of religion. At most and best they are aids to it or expressions of it.

I believe greatly in the value of our present system and custom in gathering like this twice on the Lord's Day for worship, for united prayer and praise and preaching. I believe it can be made of the greatest spiritual profit to us, and there must be profit in it or people would not continue to come. But I believe it can become most profitless and wearisome, absolutely dead and useless. And I am compelled, in the face of a vast and growing amount of independence of these exercises by people about us, and indifference to them, to wonder whether we shall not have to modify our arrangements, such as pews and routine services, and one-man ministry, whether some new method will not be devised, in which the whole membership of the Church will bear a direct part in evangelistic work—for many of us are doing nothing—whether in time to come people will not meet together for brief prayer and meditation, and then each one go his way to spend hours of the Day of Rest in acts of kindness and benevolence and spiritual ministry—a brotherhood of service—and then a gathering at the close of the day to exchange experiences and to tell what God has done and what man needs. Meanwhile, let us realize that a man may be really religious and not be able to find in this or any Church that which

quite satisfies his soul. It is not the system, or lack of system, that is going to do the business, nor is it the perfecting of the system that should be our main anxiety, but the touch of life, the life and fire of the Spirit of God. The Early Church had a very slender and elastic system. It was Episcopal, and Presbyterian, and Congregational, and, of course, all Baptist, but it had the Holy Ghost, and it was there that the main emphasis must be laid.

So, my friends, let us carry the idea through the whole of life. It is not the external that is to be emphasized, not the circumstances of the man, his social position, his means, his learning, but himself, his life, his spirit, his character. It is not what I have or have not, of money or ability. It is what I am that vitally matters. It is not even what I am *doing*—preaching to a crowd or to a handful, working in a prominent or an obscure position. It is *how* I am doing it, what sort of a character I am weaving by the doing of my work. For the externals perish. There is no temple—whether it be of Church, or wealth, or fame, or system—that will not sooner or later crumble and pass. As for material good, the day will come most certainly, and is rapidly coming, when our hands will be loosed from it, and it will be ours no longer. We shall have no more control over it than if it had never been ours.

But life will abide, the life of the spirit. The earthly house of our tabernacle will be dissolved, but we may have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. The soul abides, and it is what you are in the soul of you that matters. There the temple of God may be built and religion abide. The worship and

service of God will go on for ever and ever. All work will be worship, and the face of God will be seen everywhere by all His servants. Therefore let us seek that now and seek it sedulously—the worship and the service of God, the worship of loving obedience, of daily communion, of service of men for Christ's sake. Under all forms let us seek the essence, fellowship with God, obedience to His will, likeness to our Saviour. He who seeks will find, and he who finds possesses a treasure which cannot be stolen and which can never decay.

XXV

LEAVING OFF

"He hath left off to be wise and to do good."—PSALM xxxvi. 3.

I

AS a vivid photograph, a lightning character sketch such as the Bible gives, this is one of its saddest. A man in the uttermost danger, on an inclined plane, going down, and no one can tell at that moment what the end will be. He has loosed his hold on something and is slipping fast, and everything depends on whether or not his declension will be arrested. These are ominous words: "He has left off," both to be and to do. And a man can do that. A man can deteriorate. That is one of the clear bugle notes of the Bible; one of its trumpet calls of warning to careless and easy-going souls. There is no time in your life when degeneration is impossible. At this point in your career you, who by the mercy of God have been kept from scandalous sin, may fall into it and wreck your character and influence. You are never immune from that peril. You can always leave off. It is never, alas! too late to spoil your life. "It came to pass when Solomon was old that his wives turned away his heart from following

the Lord." The man who began with a beautiful act of consecration, and with a prayer, not for riches and long life, but for a wise and understanding heart, ended by being a fool and an apostate. And, mark you, the world abounds with people who have either left off or are in peril of leaving off. The portrait which the Psalmist draws is the facsimile of many a man and woman to-day.

You are astonished that it should be so, but it is. There are to be found to-day, I doubt not, thousands of people in London who have left off. There are some of them here, and it may be God has dircted their steps to this place—people who were, and are no longer; who did, and have now ceased.

What is it to be wise? To guard your life against destructive, defiling, and degrading influences; to keep it clean, to cultivate it, to discipline the body, to hold its cravings and desires with a firm hand; to watch opportunities for good and to take them; to hold life and its possessions as a trust from God; to obey the law of God within your heart and conscience, and to obey His voice; to take care of the inner life, and to do good. What is that? A thousand things. To help others; to do something to lessen the sadness and suffering and sin of the world; to teach in the Sabbath-school; to help in the work of the Church of God; to further some worthy cause, political, social, philanthropic; to right wrong, to relieve the oppressed, to show kindness.

And you can find plenty of people in these suburbs of London who have left off. They were active in some provincial town or in younger life, but they have dropped out, they have left off, they

are a back number; they do not contribute anything now to the general good; they do nothing now to help forward the kingdom of God; they do nothing now but look after themselves, amuse themselves, or enjoy themselves. That is true of some people whose past, if you could search it, would be found to have in it somewhere a perfect hive of activity. They have left off, and again it is one of the saddest things that could be written of a man. At best he is a cumberer of the ground; at the worst it is impossible to say what he is. Far better that a man should die, far better that he be prematurely worn out, than that this should come to be written: "He hath left off to be wise and to do good."

Are you surprised that it should happen, when Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace, and when doing good brings gladness and joy? Well, it is astonishing in a way. Many a man would tell you if he spoke the honest truth that the happiest days he ever knew were the days when with pure motive he was trying every day to do good, to win somebody to a better life, to help on the cause of goodness. Whatever his excuses for leaving off may be, he would admit the happier days. It really was a sad day for many a man when he gave up active Christian work. He thought he was going into peace, but he has not, and his character has not improved. You wonder how men can leave the mountain for the marshes; and yet in one aspect of it the wonder is on the other side, viz., that men keep on. Doing good is always difficult, and there is a curious tendency and strain towards folly in human nature. So that doing good and being wise is in a way always against the

grain. There is always a subtle hankering after something else in the breast, which needs to be fought against, a pull downwards that needs to be resisted. Subtle doubt and questioning insinuate themselves into the mind as to the worth of doing good. There are so many excuses for not keeping on that it is perfectly easy to find them and use them as a shelter for an unquiet conscience.

Ask why people leave off to be wise, and you would find one or more of the following reasons or excuses:—

1. *Strong Temptation.*—There is a fearful battle in the breast of man between wisdom and folly, good and evil. Times of storm come, when the very foundations of morality are broken up, when it seems as if wisdom were folly, as if self-denial were a piece of sheer stupidity, an unnecessary narrowing of life, a needless and foolish cutting yourself off from many pleasures—when it seems as if the man whom the Bible calls a fool were having the happy time and you were having the joyless time. It seems so, and we are the easy victims of delusion, when the mind is clouded by doubt, and the god of this world blinds our eyes. But let a man be sure, let him ground himself on the absolutely solid rock of the Bible and its teaching, and on the word of our Lord. As surely as He lived and spoke, self-indulgence is the path of folly. Long it takes the soul to find out the delusion, and often the discovery is made too late. Wisdom lies in purity, in the fear of God, in doing good, and there are found the springs of the deepest and sweetest joy.

2. The second excuse or reason would be the *difficulty of doing good.* It is as I have said, always a battle. You have to go against some-

thing within you, and there is not only this pull from within, there is the counter-attraction from without. Even at this time of day the majority of people are not wise and they are not engaged in doing good. It is a solitary path for many a man, and we are very dependent, tremendously influenced by our surroundings, by the atmosphere of custom and fashion. To rise above the acknowledged standard of the people about you, to go against the stream, to be singular, to be out of it, to breathe the breath of scorn is more difficult than anybody knows save those who have tried it.

The reason why many people have left off is that they simply succumbed to their environment. They grew tired of keeping the head of the boat against the tide, they left off resisting, and went with the stream. They forgot that God could keep them, and that by constant persistence in well-doing it has been given to some men to turn the tide and lift up the whole life of the household or the community, and that they might have done that.

3. Another excuse given for leaving off would be *the lack of encouragement.* There is somebody here to-night maybe on the verge of leaving off on that very score, it seems so perfectly thankless. You hold on to the path of wisdom; you do what you know to be right; you are kind and helpful, and not a soul says, "Well done!" Not a word or sign of appreciation is given you, and your good doing is like water spilt on the ground —swallowed up, forgotten and lost, and things get no forwarder. It is useless striving and fighting and working; you make no headway—the struggle naught availeth. That is why people leave off. They break down, they throw everything up as

Elijah did, and get under some juniper-tree; they nurse a sullen and resentful mood for a while, and then they join the Baal crowd, or they retire from the struggle; and, my friends, it is all wrong, and to the man on the verge of leaving off I would cry to him and to myself—I who get as much discouraged as anybody, and have temporary fits of giving up—I cry to-night, In God's name, and in the name of your future peace and usefulness, do not leave off—you had better die. You are, very likely, within measurable distance of victory. Often and often when I have indulged in a mood of pessimism some bit of encouragement has come, rebuking my unworthy belief; and whether it comes or not, remember that it is never vain to do the right—to serve God—to be pure.

"Some will hate thee, some will love thee,
Some will flatter, some will slight;
Cease from man and look above thee;
Trust in God and do the right."

II

I pass on to ask how men leave off, and you may say generally that it is "little by little." It is not that some morning a man wakes up, having reasoned the matter out, and, concluding that wisdom and well-doing are unworthy of further pursuit, deliberately abandons them; it is generally much more gradual—an almost imperceptible slackening of intent, a slow and subtle, and often secret, disintegration of high moral purpose.

And it begins in secret. The world has been startled this last week by the sudden news of rebellion in China. In certain provinces there has been a sudden and simultaneous uprising. The

insurrectionists have seized certain strategic positions, and it seems within the bounds of possibility that the Manchurian dynasty may be overthrown and a republic established. But there are certain people in this and other countries who are not surprised. They know that this sudden and dramatic uprising is the result of years of secret operations. This New China movement has been going on for years, and the chief instigator of it has been working night and day for years, subtly and skilfully, with this end in view. And when there comes some sudden and sensational downfall of character and reputation, if we only knew all the truth, we would discover in instances that there has been a long-preceding secret declension. Little by little things have been given up—secret prayer, the inner watch over the desires, the cultivation of the devout and the devotional spirit. The hidden fires that drive the machinery of good living have been allowed to die down, and one day the engines dramatically stopped; so religious work went down because the religious spirit had decayed. Or there has been the cherishing in secret of unwholesome desires, the hanging on the walls of the imagination of unlovely pictures, the burrowing underground of secret sins, as avarice, lust, and uncleanness; then secret companionship in questionable things—some defiling of the temple of God—sometimes secret drinking or gambling, sometimes a double life lived for years. It is really in the secret places of a man's life that apostasy begins. Let these be watched, for what a man is in secret and in private that is the measure of what he actually is. "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." Negligence,

slackness, falseness, faithlessness allowed, will soon make their influence felt to the very outer rim of the speech and conduct. There a man lives his true life, and there is what he is before God whatever appearances may be, and however long they may be kept up. Fight the good fight there, and there will be victory all along the line. Be pure there, and there will never be any taint in word or act. Keep up the habit of coming face to face with God there, and you will not fail to meet Him in the open field of conduct and speech.

III

And now, what for the man who has left off? I don't know that you could ask a question that more profoundly goes to the root of human destiny. Ask that question anywhere outside the Bible, and you get a very doubtful answer. As for the Bible itself it is pretty clear, and it says—and your reason and judgment will coincide with it—everything depends on the future, perhaps on the next step. You know you have left off. That is one thing. It has been a secret leaving off, but it is a fact. Well, to continue means a rapidly increasing deterioration. No man stands still. The leaving off to be wise seems a negative thing, but nothing remains negative. Nature abhors a vacuum, and if a man leaves undone the things he ought to have done it is immediately followed, if not preceded, by doing the things he ought not to have done. The man who leaves off to be wise becomes a fool, and that of the worst kind, and he who leaves off to do good soon does evil. So it is in the Psalm; the text with its negative statement is followed by the positive, "He deviseth mischief upon his bed."

"He setteth himself in a way that is not good, he has no abhorrence of evil." There were some very loose and wicked men in the place of business where I was for a time. But the very worst of them all, the most reckless and abandoned, was an ex-Sunday-school teacher, a man who had become the veritable slave of the devil. He was a positive genius in the way of inventing evil things.

The first verse of this Psalm is most difficult to translate; it really means that there is an oracle of transgression in the heart of the wicked; that in place of conscience suggesting good and rebuking evil, an inward monitor to guide and control, there is a continuous suggestion and impulse towards evil and wrong. The light that is in the man has become darkness. He comes to call evil good and good evil. It is impossible for the mind of man to conceive the moral degradation and vileness to which a man may sink who leaves off to be wise and to do good, and the temptation that always reaches a man who has left off is that he must keep on in the path he has begun now. Done is done and there is no undoing, is the lying whisper that reaches him. He has made his bed and chosen his company and his destiny, and by his choice he must abide—that is the temptation. But it is all, thank God! untrue. The world is not constructed on that fashion. If it be true that a man can leave off to be wise and to do good, if the Creator has endowed him with that amount of moral freedom, then he has the same freedom at least on the other side: he can leave off to be a fool and to do evil. I declare that is a perfectly rational statement, because we are living in a rational and fair universe, and the statement is based on experience and on abounding evidence.

The fool has become a wise man, the evildoer has left his wrong-doing. The Old Testament consistently declares that, and the voice of God is always calling men to it. "Depart from evil and do good." "Cease to do evil, learn to do well." "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts," this is what you can do, "and let him *return* unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him," etc. It may be said that the prolonged appeal of the prophets of the Old Testament is to an apostate and foolish and evil people to return to God, to wisdom, and to the path of right doing. The Bible is always dealing with people who have left off.

The whole business of the advent of Christ is to bring back the people who are foolish and wrong. In His pity, which never wears out, His message of grace to the disciple who denied Him, His pardon for the guilty, His parables that show me that as soon as I come to myself I can come back to God, who waits for me as a father waits for a prodigal and meets me when I am yet a great way off, nay, who comes to seek me as though I were a lost sheep who had foolishly strayed, I read great and eternal facts and possibilities. I declare to you to-night—you can leave off folly, you can break with evil, not gradually and little by little—but now. You can say of some evil thing in your life: I will not do it again, I will not be a slave—I will be God's free man. You will have a terrific battle, you may have temporary defeat, but you will conquer if you will fight; for again, we are not living in a one-sided universe. If there are powers and influences that help men away from goodness—and there are—there are also powers and influences that help men towards

goodness; and the latter are the stronger. There is not an equal balance of forces; good is mightier than evil, and it is with you, always striving with you, and you have to go against it when you do evil—you have to resist its influences and to quench its strivings; and the greatest question is, whether a man is willing to cease this resistance and by a definite and resolute act of his own will to throw himself on the side of the power that makes for righteousness, to give up the key of every room in his life into the hand of Christ, to do good. It is perfectly certain that it is to this that God is calling us, calling the man who has left off back to the forsaken task—calling the man who has never begun.

And the call is not for you to do something *but to receive power to do it*, and to keep on at it, to receive Christ, "who is made unto us wisdom and sanctification and redemption." "As many as received Him to them gave He power to become sons of God." The question is, Will you? Are you in earnest? You have left off; you may leave off again. You have left off to be wise and to do good. You may this very night leave off folly and evil. There is a power not yourself that makes for righteousness. It is the power of the Holy Ghost, and you may appropriate it by an act of faith.

XXVI

RUNNING THE RACE

"Let us run with patience the race that is set before us." —HEBREWS xii. 1.

THE central idea of this sentence is a very familiar one in New Testament Scriptures and in our own phraseology. "The race of life" is a phrase which covers a great truth. Life is a race, keener and more strenuous for some than for others, but a race for all to whom life is worthy of the name. People are trying to make it something else—a playground, a pleasure resort, a luxurious lounge, a garden of delights, a place of amusement. But the thing that is set before us is a race, and in some respects a long race, a Marathon, a long, long stretch, with the goal often far out of sight. And it is an appointed race. Each has his own peculiar course to run, with his own peculiar equipment. "The race set before us." It is your own round of duties, your own relations and responsibilities. Not that each of us has not something to do with shaping his own course, but we should all of us admit that our power in this direction is severely limited. Our track is marked out for us by circumstances, by the relations into which we have entered with other persons or into which we have

been born. We have to plod along in our own path, to plough our own furrow, to bear our own burden; and a weary way and a heavy burden it often is. Many of us, if the truth were known, wish, at least occasionally, that some other track were ours, or that we had not chosen this particular course. We look from the inside of our own lot which we know so well to the outside of somebody else's track that we know so imperfectly, and we are prone to fall into a mood of envy. His seems such an easy and smooth course compared with ours. He is so fortunate in his home, his trade or profession, his Church, his friends, his chances. He seems to go on from strength to strength, from one triumph to another. What a successful runner he is! Sun and wind seem to be in his favour. The snowstorms, the muddy road, the rugged hill, the splashed and torn clothing—he doesn't seem to know much of these. Well, we do not see all. If we did, our envy might be abated. And however that may be, here is the sober fact: we each have to run our own race, the race that is set before us, and not the one set before somebody else. It is better not to be looking at too many other tracks.

I would not hesitate to apply my text to our daily duty. Take this conception of it. It is a race, a strenuous business; let us run it. Let us give ourselves freely, earnestly, thoroughly to the discharge of our appointed work. It is an integral part of the Christian life. When daily duty is in question no Christian should be a shirker. His daily work should be a strong testimony to his faith, to its reality and value.

Probably for the majority of mankind the outstanding characteristic of their race would be its

monotony—monotony caused by repetition, monotony of the kitchen, the school, the office, the farm—the entire sameness of their duties. You hear people allude to breaking stones by the roadside as the very lowest and last type of monotonous labour. It is not at all certain that there are not many more monotonous occupations, or that any wholesome occupation in the open air is entirely monotonous. The passengers that pass along the road, the nesting birds, the animals and insects, growing things like flowers and herbs, plants and trees, corn and fruit, all provide material for thought and interest. Nature in her varied moods and seasons appeals to the mind of man, and there is always something fresh about her ways.

On the other hand, there is nothing that may not become monotonous, nothing to which you cannot become accustomed, nothing that may not degenerate into mere routine. Even success in making money may pall upon a man's taste. I have met with men who consider my calling, which throbs with interest, the most monotonous in the world. But I am speaking to people who are feeling the monotony of their daily calling, monotony unrelieved by honour or appreciation, by praise or reward. It seems to some of us that the progress of our boasted civilization tends to increase the monotony of life for the vast majority. Everything seems to be reduced to mechanical terms. The introduction of machinery into every department of life, the promotion of great syndicates and companies, tend to make machines of men who have a more or less mechanical part to play, and who are parts of a vast system in which they are more or less helpless,

and in which they are in danger of becoming things rather than persons, hands rather than living souls.

And the problem before us is to do this thing, this daily duty, the "trivial round and common task" as Keble calls it, with freshness and zeal; to run the race, and to run it with patience; to put our soul into mechanical routine and unhonoured duties in the kitchen and warehouse, the office and school. "Let us run, let us run with patience," this writer says. There is not to be crawling or discontent, but the patient performance of unattractive duty.

For we must realize that this writer is speaking of A RACE WITHIN A RACE, the race of the Christian life. And it is in these very things that I have mentioned that this life has to be lived—in the midst of petty cares, thronging duties, common tasks. It is in these very things that our Christian spirit is to be expressed. The thing we are doing daily may not be our ultimate or our only employment, but it certainly is our main employment, and it furnishes the chief opportunity for displaying the Christian spirit and the virtues of thoroughness, fidelity, and endurance.

Some of us would say that our daily employment, with the relations into which it forces us, furnishes almost the chief obstacle to our successful running of the Christian race. To use the language of the verse: if we could lay aside the weight of our daily calling, with all its provocation and irritation, if we could only change our environment, if we could get switched on to another track, we could live the Christian life. I have met with somebody quite recently who was in flat rebellion against her daily calling, and who

was in danger of breaking away from the Christian faith altogether, because God had not heard her prayer and delivered her from work which she considered degrading and humiliating. She began every day by hating her work, and finished the day in hot rebellion against her lot.

Now, how can we run this race with patience and cheerfulness? Well, first of all we must lay aside every weight. I would apply that to daily duty first of all. A weight is something that makes running difficult, and it is something you need not carry and that you can lay aside; something that makes your work more difficult; something which, if it be not actually sin, may be emphatically un-Christian.

(1) It may be resentment, or suspicion, or prejudice in relation to others. You may have got somebody on your nerves. You may be cherishing the memory of an imaginary or real slight, some jealousy or envy of somebody else. It is simply spoiling your running, taking the heart out of you for your duty. Lay it aside; ask God to help you to forget it. Perhaps the person you are thinking of is as unjust and undeserving as you think, but all your chafing of spirit will not change him. It will change you. It will turn you into a person with a grievance which generally means a person who is a plague to himself and to everybody else. The burden of illwill towards anybody is one that will prevent you from running your race, and is too heavy for you to carry.

(2) Or the weight that some people need to lay aside is made up of dignity and self-importance. While they are debating whether their dignity will allow a certain thing without its suffering too

great a shock, somebody runs past them. A person who has to consider at every turn whether he can do this or that compatibly with his dignity will never win the race.

(3) And our successful running may be spoilt by over-anxiety. Over-anxiety about succeeding spoils the candidate in many an examination; it ruins the competitor in many a contest. Supreme anxiety to be first sometimes defeats its own ends, and puts the competitor last. There is such a thing as over-carefulness, a consuming desire to excel, which lands its possessor in an agitation unfitting him for the best performance of his duty. If we could only leave things in God's hands, and go to them with even a dash of carelessness as to the final result, so that we did our best, it would be a great help to the best performance of our tasks.

(4) One other thing may spoil us unless it be laid aside, viz., discontent, chafing against certain elements in our circumstances, elements which fret and irritate us. Well, there is something in all our circumstances which we cannot alter, and which, perhaps, cannot be altered. You cannot adapt your circumstances to yourself, they are too stubborn; you cannot manipulate them as you can manipulate figures in an argument. But you can adapt yourself to your circumstances. You cannot broaden the gateway, but you can adjust your burden so that it will take you, and that is the only way to peace.

And the other thing to be resolutely laid aside is sin, transgression of God's law. I need not speak of the fact that this unfits for duty, takes the freshness out of the spirit, and spoils the zest of life. I need only emphasize the obvious fact that it simply makes impossible a successful

running of the Christian race, or, indeed, any running at all of that race. Sin of any kind estranges the soul from God, creates the cloud between the soul and Him; and there is nothing worse than estrangement for impeding the soul in its course. How often it happens that some defect of temperament, some inconsistency, some flaw in character, some lust of the flesh, simply prevents the running. You make a spurt now and then, but you stop, or you struggle painfully along, stumbling and falling every few steps. You cannot run with that thing in your life. At best you can but crawl. How many people there are whose Christian running is spoilt and ruined because they carry into it something of the old life, some longing unsuppressed, some passion unsubdued. They will not strip for the race.

Then what is to be the impelling and governing motive in this business? That is the next consideration. For it will be seen at once that the author of this letter does not leave his readers with just an abstract exhortation. He cites the examples of the great and good of past ages who have fought and raced, suffered and won, and he bids them think of these as standing round, as if they were so many keenly interested spectators watching the contest. The runners are to draw inspiration to steadfast endurance and patient effort from the memory of those who have gone before. And we may all do that. Great biographies always help us. The memory of the great and good is a continual inspiration. There is always an argument of impulsion in Christian history. But the Divine Word is never content with mere human examples: every one of them has some flaw in it. Here is our writer's primary

argument—looking unto Jesus. There is a great deal in that simple phrase. It means more than prayer, though prayer is in it. It means what the third verse expresses—"considering Him," weighing yourself with Him, comparing your lot with His. It is what He Himself bids His disciples do, at least by implication, in such words as these: "A disciple is not greater than his Lord."

It has cured many a soul of impatience and distrust, of discontent and complaining, of weariness and despair. There is antidote and healing in it. Before you come to the help which is to be most surely derived from personal contact with the living Christ there is the certain help and inspiration to be derived from considering His example. That is in the word Author, which means Leader. "He endured," says this writer: he uses the same word there that he uses for "patience" in our text. He ran the race set before Him with patience. And what a race it was! We have spoken of monotony. Think of thirty years at Nazareth, in a country with no railways, no roads as we understand them, of the unvarying life from day to day in that little village shut in among the Galilean hills! Think of thirty years in a peasant's home, of poverty, drudgery, of the Divine soul of the Son of God shut in to this narrow and circumscribed lot, unappreciated, unhonoured, unknown, unrecognized, and uncomplaining! I think it might cure the soul of the burdening sense of monotony if we looked to Jesus. There is less of sameness in most of our lives than there was in His.

And as there was monotony, so there was lowliness in His lot. It might help us in curbing and curing social ambition and pride and restless

discontent to remember that our Lord was a working-man. He was never anything but poor, so poor that He had not where to lay His head. I suppose that when He died He owned nothing save His clothes, part of which the soldiers gambled for. The perfect life of our Lord and that of His greatest Apostle, St. Paul, were lived in complete and bare poverty. So our great Divine Leader ran his race and never faltered.

Looking at His course from another point of view might cure us of discouragement. You see Him doing good every day, pouring out His life in the doing, unappreciated, unthanked, scorned, blamed, criticized, slandered, condemned, persecuted, mocked, scourged, crucified; and enduring, enduring the contradiction of sinners, enduring the cross, persevering to the end. Undoubtedly it has been by remembering Him, looking to Him steadfastly, that hearts have grown brave and hands strong, and contentment and peace have stolen into the vexed and troubled soul, and people have grown ashamed both of pride and complaining.

Once more, it is by looking to Him that we are cured of anxious care. We see how peacefully and with what tranquil trust in the midst of outward tumult He committed Himself into the hands of the Father. Even when at the last His friends fell away and left Him alone, He found peace and rest and consolation in the Infinite Love which He knew surrounded and sustained Him.

My dear friends, everything depends on where we look in the running of this great race of life, to what example, to what philosophy, what is your ideal, your standard, whether you look up or down, up or around, who is your guide, your

leader. There is ONLY ONE TO WHOM WE CAN SAFELY LOOK, and whom in all things we may confidently follow. And the supreme comfort, the comfort of all comforts, is that, in looking to Him, we are not looking to an example only, or to a written word, a code of instructions. They are all there, and they are invaluable. What Jesus was, did, taught, suffered—we cannot do without this, but we have something more and far more precious. We have a living Friend and Saviour, close at hand every day, a Friend with whom we may hold actual fellowship, with whom we may live, by whose strength we may be made strong. You know what human fellowship is, how spirit mates with spirit, how the strength of a strong soul, the courage of a brave heart and the hope of a fearless and radiant character pass into you and become a part of your own equipment. Well, all that one human soul can be to another, and far more, Christ can be, has been, is, to hearts that know and trust Him. I take His great words, "Come unto Me, all ye that are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." "In the world ye shall have tribulation, in Me ye have peace." "Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in Me." "Abide in Me and I in you." And I believe they are addressed to me and to you. I bring them to you and beg you to try and lay hold of them and act on them. In the monotony of life, in its stress and strain, its disappointments and losses, the sense which oppresses some of you that things are all going wrong—He stands in the midst of all these puzzling and trying experiences and says, "In Me ye have peace." And it is true. Thirty or forty generations of Christian men rise up to say it is gloriously true. Begin the race, begin

it again, persevere in it. Do not grow weary or faint. The goal is not in sight, but it is certain. He will not fail you. There is not only His work for you, but His work in you. He is both the Author and the Perfecter of your faith. Let us run with patience the race, for the goal is Eternal Life; run the race, and leave all the rest to Him.

XXVII

WANTING IS—WHAT?

"What lack I yet?"—MATTHEW xix. 20.

THERE are various conceivable ways of asking this question as it relates to character or conduct. It might be a challenge uttered in a self-complacent and satisfied spirit. It is quite likely that some of us are unconscious of any lack in ourselves in that direction. We are not distressed about ourselves; we are content to go on as we are; we do not see, considering all things, how we could have done much better. The rich young ruler was not like that. The question, as he asked it, sprang from a genuine and noble discontent. He came to Jesus unsatisfied, unrestful, with this question on his lips first: "What shall I do?" You can never understand this attractive and lovable young man at all, save as you think of him coming to Jesus as to a soul-physician to have his case diagnosed and to be prescribed for. He had not arrived at the secret of life. He had not peace or joy or real happiness. There was a vacuum, and he did not know how to fill it, a feeling of disappointment, a hunger and craving that had not been met. He wanted a satisfying life, and he had not got it.

And you will agree that he had brought his disease to the right quarter. To the Master of life he came with his incomplete life with this double cry: "What shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" and then, after telling what he *had* done, "What lack I yet?"

I hold it as a very significant fact that such a man should ask such a question. It reveals to you that a man *who is very rich* may be very dissatisfied. I believe we have an idea, which is utterly falsified by experience, that money means happiness. Here is a man who has it and prizes it, and who is not at rest. There is many a struggling man who if asked what his lack is would answer, "Money." Let a man be where the young ruler was, and he is the envied of most people. But there is nothing more certain than that money cannot bring peace. I know men who are placed far beyond the reach of want, whose ample means are as secure as anything can be, and who are almost strangers to joy. Care sits heavily on their brow, and disappointment seems to be their daily companion. Here and there at least the wealthy man walks about his spacious grounds with a heavy heart, and is less mirthful than his gardeners. He can buy anything he wants, but he cannot purchase peace and heart rest. "A man's life," said our Lord—"a MAN'S life," mark you—"consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth." *Things* alone—success, fame, honour, houses, and lands—cannot satisfy the soul, and our Lord calls the man a fool who thought that they could and who tried to make them. A friend of mine who had just had the experience asked me a short time ago what I should do if I came into a legacy of £1,500 a year. I cannot tell. I cannot imagine that it will make

him a happier man than he was before, or that it will add to the quantity of his manhood. And it might do him or me harm. It might slacken the moral fibre. It does with some people. It might narrow my sympathies, it might dim for me the glory of the unseen and spiritual. It might make me self-sufficient and proud. The removal of the compulsion to strive and to be careful, the removal of the pressure from life does not always make for beauty or strength of character. I would not be the first man by many a thousand who has been spoilt by outward good. As sunshine causes to fade the rich colours in carpet and curtains, so outward prosperity sometimes causes to fade some of the beauty of the inner life. If a thousand pounds could be put into the hands of twelve young men here to-night, it would seem almost as if the greatest good had come to you. Yet one questions how many of you would be better men for it two years hence, and it is to grow character that we are here. I can never get away from the emphatic word of our Lord, that it is hard for the rich man to enter into the kingdom of God, partly because, as He seems to say, he is likely to come to trust in his riches. Here is a man who has abundance, and has want in his soul.

The other thing that strikes you at once is that correctness of conduct does not of necessity buy peace. This young man has not been morally ruined by his wealth. He has escaped the vices of self-indulgence and folly that often accompany great wealth, though of course he proves that they need not. He has the stirrings of a noble ambition in him, this man; he has striven, and striven successfully, to keep clear of vice. He probably despises and loathes it. He has, as you would say,

kept himself straight; he has been interested in higher things. When Christ recites certain of the commandments to him, he says he has observed them. I think he means that he has steered his course by them. It has been his ambition to live up to them. And if you are surprised that a man in his position should be dissatisfied, you are probably more astonished that a man of his moral character should be crying, "What shall I do?" and "What do I lack?" Surely there could be nothing wrong with such a man; surely he is most admirable, and you are not surprised to know that Jesus, beholding him, loved him.

I have never before noticed as I have during the study necessary for this sermon our Lord's omissions from the list of commandments which He cites. Whatever be the motive, you will see that He omits the commandments that relate to God, and mentions only those that have to do with a man's relation to his fellows. According to Matthew's narrative, He quotes "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," but in none of the three narratives does He quote the greatest commandment of all: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and strength." I wonder why He omitted it, and what the young man would have said if He had quoted it, and whether this had been the profound and vital lack in his life.

But now I take the question and our Lord's answer to it as given by Luke. "*One* thing thou lackest," only one. And I ponder over the word. I have heard people to whom some great good has come say, "I want only one thing now to complete my happiness." It may be somebody's presence, reconciliation with somebody, news that all is well with somebody. It is very rarely that there is no

flaw in the joy. Generally something is wanting. Commonly our joy is touched with pain. If some of you were asked to-night what you lack in outward things or human relations, you would probably answer, many things. Some of you a home, some a congenial friend, one whose ideals coincide with yours—a comprehending friend. Life is fearfully lonely with you. And some *love*, and some a helpful influence, and some congenial occupation, and others would say, "I lack almost everything that enriches life."

But turning the question in upon character and conduct, what do you lack? And some of us would answer again: "Almost everything. I am stricken through with a sense of my moral poverty of character and achievement. I am far enough away from this man. I could never say that I have kept all these commandments in the spirit as well as in the letter."

Mark you, a man has come a long distance towards the kingdom when Jesus Christ can say to him, "*One thing* thou lackest." "One thing is needful." And yet you know that the one thing may be the primary thing, and, lacking that, all other possessions may be spoilt. Naaman the Syrian had almost everything that a man could desire, but he had leprosy with it, and that spoilt all the rest. A man may have achieved enormous success and amassed a vast fortune, but if he has ruined his health in doing it or is a confirmed dyspeptic, the chief thing is lacking. He has everything but the power to enjoy. A man and woman may have a great house crammed with art treasures and delightsome things, but if there be no love in it the vital sweetness is not there and the residence is not a home.

It is just possible that if you got all the things you need they might not bring you all you think. One would not question that you need them and that they are good, but here is the simple truth. You may have them and yet have unsatisfied hunger at your heart, and, on the other hand, you may be denied them and yet have peace because you have something else.

What is it that this young man lacks? What is it that he needs? Not chiefly to get rid of his property. That is not the main thing, though it is the only thing that some people see in the answer of our Lord to him. That is the part of the answer that puzzles people. I don't know that you can wholly explain it. You know that our Lord did not demand that of some people. Also realize that the demand was for the sake of the man himself, the demand of one who loved him, who saw his possibilities, and who wanted to make an Apostle of him, as I always think. Also remember again that he had come, bringing a restless and ill-at-ease soul, to the Physician of souls, and here is His prescription: The way to peace and life, the life of the ages, *for you* is through the renunciation of your property. His property was a snare to him. He could not say with Zaccheus, "Behold, the half of my goods I give to the poor." He had not got on the top of his wealth to that extent, or perhaps the demand would never have been made. But dispossessing himself of his wealth was not the goal. It was the way to the goal, if I may put it so. The chief and vital thing was following Jesus. There was the way to the life of the ages, the indestructible and satisfying life. I believe that divesting himself of his property alone would not have brought him life or peace. He might have

been just as sad and restless as before. What he needed was Christ. The one thing lacking was the spirit of complete surrender to the mastership of Christ. The vision to see that being with Jesus, sharing the companionship of Jesus, and sharing His very life, was worth more than all the wealth and glory of the world—that was the thing he needed, and I cannot doubt that if he could have brought himself to pay the price and make the sacrifice, there would have come to him peace and rest and joy—just as there did to St. Paul, who gave up everything—which would have blotted out of his mind all consciousness of sacrifice. But he could not pay the price. The Master had touched the tender place in his character, and all the love of Christ failed to draw him away from his great possessions at the moment. He went away sorrowful. Now, my friends, there is no question about the one thing needful for every soul of man, and the one thing lacking in many of your lives. It is absolutely certain. It is the mastership of Christ. You can only fulfil your divinely appointed destiny as you follow Him. You can never be the man you were meant to be apart from Him. The question is, What is it that stands in the way of your following Him? Not wealth in your case; not perhaps the same thing in any two cases. In one it is companionship; in another, some secret sin, some unlawful delight. In many and many a professing Christian's life there is something that prevents the full acceptance of Christ as Lord of your life, and it destroys the influence and spoils the usefulness and mars the effectiveness of your life. You are an ineffective Christian because of this one thing. And if you are in earnest about the way of life, you will dare to face it, you will dare to ask to see

it, to allow Christ to lay His hand upon it, to say, in the words of the hymn—

> "Jesus, the hindrance show
> Which I have feared to see,
> Yea, let me now consent to know
> What keeps me back from Thee."

Believe this, that Christ is calling you to follow Him; that it is the only way of life; that obedience to the call always means renunciation, and sometimes the renunciation of a lawful thing —a thing which others might keep and a thing that is precious or sweet or honourable or lucrative.

But mark, it is always in order that you may secure something more precious, more worthy of manhood and womanhood. Not to strip you does Christ call you, but to clothe you in richer raiment. Not that you may be divested and depleted, but to give you a greater treasure and a joy in which the former treasure and joy will not be missed.

You may be certain that Peter and John would never have gone back to their boats and nets, nor Matthew to the receipt of custom, after having had experience of Christ; and as for Paul, who gave up honour and repute, and friends, and position, and wealth, and all that men count dear for Christ, you know what he said about them all. They were but as refuse in comparison with the joy and the bliss and the honour of belonging to Christ. And that is where the young ruler failed. It is just here that great possessions proved a snare. When we have said all we can for him, and loved him as much as the Lord Himself loved him, we are compelled to say that his possessions were more to him than all the glory of Christ. If

he had been a poorer man he might have gone, but when it came to be a question between Christ and his property he chose the latter and let Christ go. The diagnosis of his case was, "You cannot have both," and he let the greater go and chose the less. It cut him to the heart to do it. He went away sorrowful, but he went away and we hear of him no more. I wish it were true that he came back, but we have no evidence of it, and I think if he had it would have been recorded. I almost think he would have written a Gospel and have risen to great eminence in the Church. He went back and tried to do his best, but I believe his money would have lost half its charm for him and that he would never be anything but a man ill at ease and dissatisfied.

My dear friends, it is a great crisis in a man's life when his defect is made clear to him, when the way of life is made known, when Christ calls. That is where some of you are to-night. You know that you have never fully accepted Christ as your Saviour and Lord, and you know the thing that you will not give up.

It is money, maybe, with some of you. It would clear the path and bring a great increase of power to you if you would do with your money what Christ would have you do—some great and generous thing. But with others it is something far less worthy—a pleasure, or a connection, or a habit that is marring your life and ruining your soul. Once more the choice is between it and Christ. You have the power to cling to it. You have come to a place where two roads meet; you can take Christ's road or your own; you have power to decide; you really will decide one way or the other. But know this, that the way of Christ is

the only way of life. He knows what is necessary for you, and you can only have true life on His terms. It may be a great moment for some of you, the watershed of life. God grant that you come down on the right side and say, "I *will* follow Christ!"

XXVIII

A SPRING SERMON TO YOUNG PEOPLE

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy ; break up your fallow ground : for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you."—HOSEA x. 12.

EVERYBODY who has travelled through the country during the last few weeks, and has used his faculties of observation well, has noticed the immense activity displayed by farmer and gardener. Ploughing, clearing, weed-burning, planting, and sowing have been going on everywhere. The days have brought golden opportunities. The spring sunshine has called for immediate labour; and now many a field and garden lies ready sown and waiting for the gracious showers of April to cause the seed to germinate and the plants to strike root and grow. We have had, if I may say so, a time of grace in nature which the town dweller hardly appreciates, but which the tiller of the soil has eagerly seized and used.

My text is a spring message. It comes in a chapter which abounds with agricultural metaphors. You see the vine, the newly ploughed furrow, the threshing-floor with the unmuzzled heifers gladly treading out the corn. And then, as

though the propitious season were swiftly passing and there were some indolent and negligent farmers who had allowed some seasons to pass unused and their land to drift out of cultivation, there is this call, "Break up your fallow ground." Bestir yourselves, seize the favourable opportunity of the spring, that you may have the joy of summer and the gladness of the harvest.

I

I think I see first of all an indictment in the text. It may be half hidden, but it is there. Fallow ground is ground that has been allowed to go out of cultivation. It is ground therefore that produces nothing for the time being. And when ground produces nothing else, it generally produces a very undesirable crop of thorns, thistles, and nettles, and much more. If man does not sow the field with good seed, "the idle wind or the flighty bird" often sows it with useless and mischievous things.

You have only to leave a field alone and it swings back into the wilderness and becomes as unlovely as the sluggard's garden. And as the prophet looked abroad on the field of his nation's life, he saw vast tracts of it as a fallow field, unworked, uncultivated, and therefore bringing forth useless, mischievous, and poisonous things. That is to say, the nation lay there with its magnificent possibilities unrealized, its early promise unfulfilled, and its early activities checked. The soil was there, and the capacity was there; but it lay idle and barren because it had not been worked.

How many a life is like that! A fallow life! What vast stretches of possibility exist in the

life of London! Think of what a man may become! Listen to Shakespeare's description of him: "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!" Man at his best.

Then think of thousands of unlovely lives, unfruitful lives—wastrel lives, weedy lives, producing nothing that has any value. Some produce only vice—their very powers are atrophied for lack of use and cultivation. There are men with apparently no intellect, men with no faith, men with no moral purpose or earnestness or vision, men with no soul. They are God's creation marred, barren, vicious, through lack of use or through misuse. How many people you may meet whose nature is just a bit of barren soil! Do you ask why? They never cultivated mind or soul or opportunity. Their possibilities were as great as those of many others, but they trifled with them, scoffed at them, or presumed upon them. They refused to believe in the need for strenuous effort. Physically, intellectually, spiritually, they were idle, and life drifted. There are enough sterile and fruitless lives, barren and wasted lives, useless and mischievous lives—lives that are a plague and torment to society, in London, to arouse and alarm every one of us lest we fall after the same example of indolence.

And there are not only lives wholly wasted, but there are uncultivated departments of life. There are people who are developing and pampering the body at the expense of the mind and the soul. How many of us are simply neglecting the life of the intellect—steadily refusing to read any book,

going along the same furrow every day of what we are obliged to do and never breaking up a bit of new ground; using certain cells of the brain, and allowing the others to become atrophied; never feeding our minds with a bit of fine literature or our souls with some noble biography. Vast stretches of the life are never touched with the ploughshare or the seed-drill. And such promise as they had once!

In a very lovely park near my old home in Gloucestershire there was a most remarkable house—a house that had never been built. It was planned on a most elaborate and costly scale. The best and most costly materials were brought to the spot. For months quite an army of workmen were employed, and then the scheme was dropped. The owner lost interest in it. He had planned more than he had means to carry through. What might have been a noble building with spacious rooms in it, resounding with the laughter of children and of happy guests, the admiration of the neighbourhood, is an unsightly ruin. The timbers have rotted, the glass is broken, the very stones and bricks have crumbled. It is a blot on the fair landscape.

There is many a life like that if we only knew it. A large part of the grief of God as He looks out over the world must be the unfinished and decaying characters of men. So many of us are only half living. There are all the rich capacities of mind and soul with which we are dowered unused, silent, unproductive. Have you never felt, about some person whom you have met, that he was planned on a grand scale? There were immense possibilities in him! What a fine head and frame! What a preacher or speaker or writer

he might have made! And perhaps he began, and then the cost was too great, the effort too much. He lost interest in his own career, in the building of his own character He has done nothing after all.

My friends, my dear young friends, it is the peril of all of us. There are capacities slumbering in you. There are flashes of performance that show them. There are signs of the power to speak, to write words that shall live and burn in the life of the nation, to paint, to plan. Music here, mechanics there; and there is the peril that through sheer indolence the life will become fallow—that the musician, the poet, the philanthropist, the missionary, the scientific discoverer, the capable, broad-minded man of business will never appear. The field may be covered with weeds instead of a golden crop of wheat.

And you must allow me to say that the greatest peril is that the very highest reaches of life will fail of cultivation and of fruit. I mean that there slumbers in every one of us—not a statesman or teacher, not something great and famous, but a saint. I declare my own belief that every one of us is born with a capacity for knowing God, for holding communion with Him, for living a life of triumphant goodness.

And it is this part of us that lies fallow. Here is a fact. The greatest thing in this world or any other is open to all of us, viz., *sheer goodness*—likeness to God—and that is the very faculty which we are allowing to die down in us. We do not realize the necessity for developing it. We have an idea that it will take care of itself. We are like some great organ. A splendid instrument is our life, one of marvellous compass and

infinite variety, and God has put the instrument into our hands, and we are at the keyboard—and the best and sweetest stops have never been touched! Nay, there are manuals that have never been fingered!

And here is the edge of the indictment. My life is a trust; body, soul, and spirit have been committed to me by God, and when my life's promise and possibility go unrealized by my indolence, I am guilty of unfaithfulness. I am responsible to God for the proper use of myself. There may not be any great vice in me, but my life may be a fallow life, a useless life—a life that accomplishes nothing. The splendid machinery of it may be allowed to rust and perish. There is not only pathos, there is tragedy in it. For I must give account of my possibilities to Him who called me into existence and who trusted me.

II

But there is more than indictment, there is a call. *Break up your fallow ground.* If your life is ever to alter you must play a large part in the altering of it. Go and examine your life. Survey the field of it. But not in the limelight of some flattering friend who feeds your pride and fills you with self-satisfaction. Examine it in the light of the teaching and example of Christ. I appeal especially to professedly Christian people. I have a right to appeal to you. Do not ask, What harm is there in this or that? Do not say you might have been much worse, you might have broken out in this direction and that. Of course you might. You might have been a thief or a scoundrel, but it would have been an infinite

disgrace to you and to your upbringing if you had been. Thank God that some vices have not appeared in the soil of your nature and that others have been extirpated. But let us remember that the purpose for which a field is weeded and cleaned is that it may be planted and sown. Reverting to the figure before us, we may easily see that no man would be satisfied with a merely clean field. If any friend of mine took me round his farm and said triumphantly, "You see, there is not a weed in it," I should naturally ask, "What else is there in it? What are you going to do with it?" So the question is, What are you producing? Here is a question which our Lord asked of His disciples: "What do ye more than others?" The question implies that there is strength in Him to enable us to do more. And the question is, What about the fallow reaches of my life? Am I living as thousands are, as though I had no spiritual nature at all? Am I producing anything in the way of character, example, service to others which is for the glory of God? I have it in me, I know. I have got the talent. The question is, Am I burying it in the earth? Is my original capital, which might be quadrupled, lying idle?

What about my life? "Let a man examine himself," says St. Paul; and again, "Examine your own selves." Let a man be with his own soul like Nehemiah, who went out at night under the silent and brilliant moon and saw all the ruin of Jerusalem. Let a man ask whether the world has bewitched him, whether pleasure or business or levity have been allowed to drive prayer and desire and love for good things right out of his life. It is the most momentous

question that he can ask. Then let there be a new beginning. Nehemiah is not going to break his heart over the ruins. He is going to rebuild the wall. If he doesn't rebuild it it will never be rebuilt. Desolations like that are not healed by miracle. He will have to work and be ready to fight, he must hold the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. But he will *do it* by the good hand of God upon him. Here is the hopefulness of my text. The ground that has been fallow may be fruitful. The seasons of God await the effort of man, and, apart from your effort, spring, summer and autumn will come and go and leave no blessing behind.

The call of my text, like all true calls of God, has in it the ringing note of hope. It seems to say to people who are producing wickedness, vice, lies, "The Lord is waiting to rain righteousness upon you." The wilderness may become a garden of the Lord! Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree. This seems to be the message of the text. Believe in your own splendid possibilities; believe that capacity for goodness, for a life that you will not be ashamed to hold up before God, is still yours. Do not think for a moment that the curse of barrenness is over your life—that, strive as you will, nothing can come of it. From whatsoever quarter that suggestion proceeds it is a lie. There is hope for everybody. To have life at all is to have a splendid instrument with wondrous possibilities.

But everything depends on whether or not we will heed a call such as this, whether you are ready and willing to take action. There is no need to question the attitude of God. There is no need to use the prayer of the leper, "Lord,

if Thou wilt, Thou canst." There is no doubt about the power or the willingness of God. The only question is about our own willinghood and our own seriousness. Nothing will be done in your life apart from yourself. It is *your* entrustment. No one, not even God Himself, can win our battles for us. He may win them through us. No one can say it is easy to make a barren life fruitful. The longer it has lain fallow the harder it is. But no soil in this world ever bore a crop of use and beauty apart from toil, incessant and strenuous. The question is, Are you prepared to face the toil and the fight? If you are there is help—help sufficient and complete.

We have not only to break up the fallow ground, we have to seek the Lord. As surely as a man discovers the barrenness of his life he will need to do that. First for forgiveness, and then for hope and courage and strength. While it is true that nothing will be done apart from you, it is also true that you can do nothing apart from God. It is only by co-operation with the Divine that the desert becomes a garden. But there is nothing more certain than that His blessing will fall like the rain on newly sown seed, on every effort to bring the life under His control and to fulfil His purpose in it.

It is time to seek the Lord. What a word that is! It is a thing we have all of us neglected. To do it now for many of us would in itself be breaking up fallow ground. We have lived as though God were not. We have lain down at night and risen in the morning and gone through the day as though there were no God. It is time to seek the Lord. Over time! We have let it go so long that we are almost despondent about the

value of doing it now. We have let our spiritual life drift so far that we are disposed to let it go altogether. So many pieces have gone off the board that some of us are disposed to throw up the game altogether. We have let so much time go that it is not much use setting out to be a saint now. If the saint slumbered in us it has been so long neglected in its slumbers that it must be quite dead now. When land has been left alone for long it seems an almost impossible business to get it clean and fruitful. And there is no denying the difficulty. But, my brethren, some of the greatest successes in life have been won not in easy and ideal conditions but in the most damaging and almost hopeless. Think of a man like Whittier, son of an obscure farmer, taught for a few years in the front room of a cottage, then flung full into the work of life, handicapped by ill health, with no chance of further education save a year at Haverhill Academy. Think of him, out of those adverse conditions, cultivating and winning a life that bore the richest crop of culture. Think of him writing hymns that will live for ever, and doing a work which is immortal in the freeing of the slave. There is no ambition hopeless that sets towards goodness. For the will of God is on your side. And part of the meaning of this sentence, "It is time to seek the Lord," is here. The Lord is ready to be sought and found. He is near—He waits to be gracious.

If not, what?

Well, if we follow out the figure of the text the fallow ground may go so far as to become practically impossible to reclaim and cultivate. And if we apply it to a man's soul-life, we may say with appalling truth that the day will come when it is

too late to begin—too late for the poor neglected garden of a man's soul to bring forth any fruit unto God.

But what I want to insist on is that there are psychological moments in life when a man *may* begin again. This may be one of them. The time to seek the Lord is *now*. It is God's only adverb of time. "Behold, now is the accepted time. Behold, now is the day of salvation."

XXIX

FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHURCH

A SERMON FOR THE CLOSING WEEKS OF THE YEAR

"Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."—HEBREWS xii. 15–17.

THIS is a vitally important piece of inspired counsel and warning addressed to people meeting in the name of Christ. This is what it seems to say, speaking generally: "Be jealous over the Church of Christ as to its purity and its piety. Guard jealously its life. The honour of Christ is involved in the name and character of His Church." "Look diligently," the passage begins. It is the word which as noun we translate into "bishop" or "overseer." It may have several meanings. Here it apparently means, "Be alert and watchful, act the part of bishop in the Church." It speaks not of officiousness, not of authoritative setting to rights, but of responsi-

bility. Of course, the unit in the Church is the individual, and the beginning of any man's diocese is himself. To begin with, I must look diligently lest *I* be the man that fails of the grace of God, lest I exert a baneful and bitter influence in the Church. I am either helping or hindering, lifting up or dragging down the Church to which I belong. Every one of us is doing that upon our own circle in the Church. You may strike a note in conversation that lowers the tone of it: you may bring in a current of influence which at once lowers the moral temperature. Any one person may be a disintegrating influence, may coarsen the thing which he touches or wound the tender conscience or blunt the spiritual sensibilities. Therefore the first necessity is that I be bishop in the diocese of my own soul. No man is fit to watch over another who has not learned to keep watch over himself. No one is fit to manage a class in Sunday-school who has not learnt to manage his own spirit. The slovenly person cannot rebuke untidiness in another. "If a man knows not how to rule his own house, how," asks St. Paul, "shall he rule the Church of God?" I can never cultivate other people's vineyards effectively unless I keep my own. And my "house" and my "vineyard" is *my own soul.* I dare not leave that to take care of itself. The care of it, as of my body and my mind, is a sacred trust committed to me by God.

Now may I put it in this way? I have to watch my soul, my life, and my character—*for the sake of the Church.* It does not matter, perhaps, primarily to *me* what becomes of my soul. But if I neglect my soul and lose it, this means damage to the Church, injury to the religion of Christ, wounding afresh my Lord, discrediting His cause; and that is a

vital and serious matter. My friends, I think I would urge you to do things for the sake of the Church and for the sake of Christ—such as exercising care, diligence, self-denial—which I would hardly ask you to do for your own sake. It is so perfectly true that we do not live to ourselves, that our character and conduct have far-reaching consequences, that every one of us is bound to cultivate his own life.

But it is perfectly clear from the context, as well as from other teachings of the New Testament, that no man is to be exclusively occupied in the building up of his own life and character. What this writer does here, what all the New Testament writers do (it is, in fact, sound Christian ethics), is to bring home to the heart of each member a sense of responsibility for the whole. Here is what this writer says, "Lift up the hands that hang down." And previously, "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works." And afterwards, "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." It is all intended to create within the breast of each a sense of responsibility for the whole, an *esprit de corps*, so that the ambition of each shall be the building up of the whole.

It is a great thing when members of a Christian Church care for its institutions, for its buildings and its methods; when they love—as I have heard people in the provinces say they do—the very stones of which the material house is built. But it is a far greater thing when men care for the living stones of which the Spiritual Church is composed and do so with a lofty spiritual care. Every minister has come to thank God for the devout souls who care for the character of the Church, who

pray and labour for the spiritual welfare of those who compose it.

Believe me, my brethren, it is the greatest thing of all. I would yield to no man in care for the unsaved: our solicitude should be kept warm and fervent for the ungathered. But there must always be a great care for the half-saved, for the people among us whose progress is arrested, whose spiritual zeal is imperilled. There is grave reason to suspect the genuineness of my Christian life if I have no great care for the character of the Church, and the gravest if I have no fervent love of my brethren. Our Lord said almost more about this to His disciples than about evangelizing zeal. He seemed to be haunted with fear that this would be the one thing they would fail in. Apparently, by His teaching, their loving unity, the unity of holy brotherhood, would be their strongest testimony to the world. We may be sure of this—that it is by the testimony of *character* as truly as by testimony of utterance that the Church will win men to Christ; and the character of a Church is made up of the character of its members. So this writer says, "Be bishops to each other; cultivate a loving solicitude for each other." Find ways to help, to succour and strengthen the tempted, the sorrowful, the weary, the doubting. Care for men. Do not go to a Church just for the preaching. It may be a Christian duty to hear sermons; but it is rather a poor and a very dangerous duty if it ends in itself. This is certain—it is an imperative duty to care for men; and they are the best hearers of sermons who care and labour for men, and especially for the men who belong to Christ.

The cultivation of the shepherdly function is

a great need of the hour. The care of souls, which is nothing more or less than the cultivation of a loving spiritual brotherhood, is a duty and privilege which needs to be laid upon the heart of the Church here and everywhere.

II

The reason for this duty is to be found in the spiritual perils that surround the path of the Christian, perils which are none the less because they are often unsuspected. There sounds through all this letter a note of warning for drowsy and self-satisfied Christians. I can conceive of no better exercise than that every member of the Church should read this letter carefully through and re-read it during the closing weeks of the year. The doctrine which some excellent people have held and taught, that the converted man is safe and may rest in his conversion, is simply shattered to pieces by the teaching of this book. Safe! Why, you know he is not safe. You can find in the circle of your acquaintances in this and every Church people who have been simply sucked away from all high Christian living by the pleasures and amusements and excitements of the senses and of the world. The city of London abounds with people who have backslidden from the Christian faith—the backsliding began in neglect, in carelessness about prayer. And this book abounds in warnings over and over; they come like the echo of thunder among the hills. "How shall we escape if we neglect?" "Take heed to yourselves that ye lose not the things that ye have gained." "Let us fear lest a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should

come short of it." Men may drift away from Christ. They may draw back unto perdition. All that before you come to the perils named in my text. Read the letter, my brethren, read it carefully, and lay its warnings to heart. They belong to the Christians of this day. They exactly suit our perils; and they are all of a piece with the words of loving warning that fall from the lips of our Lord. The salt may lose its savour; the servant may bury his talent and lose it and be doomed for his unfaithfulness. The friends of the bridegroom may be caught unprepared and be shut out from the marriage feast. A branch may be in the vine and yet be taken away because it bears no fruit. These are not idle words. They are intended to awaken the self-complacent soul.

What is set down in this letter may happen to any member of this Church, *is* perhaps happening to some. The bright morning may pass into the clouded midday, and the end may be the black night. You may drift away from Christ. Your children may, or your neighbours. You can never afford to be unwatchful. Perils are all about you. You are never safe till your feet stand within the pearly gate, and the white robe and the conqueror's palm are yours. Therefore your motto must be WATCHFULNESS over your own spirit and that of others. It was the Master's word to the disciples: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." "What I say unto you I say unto all, watch." So, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."

Note the perils mentioned here. They are very real. There is failing of the grace, or falling from the grace of God. As the Israelites failed through cowardice and unbelief to enter into their inheri-

tance, you may lose the inheritance of the soul. You may fall away from your fervour, and love, and interest.

There may be a root of bitterness springing up, not a quarrel among brethren as we sometimes think, but a root of defiling sin springing up in your life and through you infecting the lives of others. Watch your thoughts. I said it was not a quarrel, but it may be ill will against your Christian brother, bitter thoughts against him because he is better than you and rebukes you by his life.

Worse than that may come into the Church—sins of the flesh, coarse and gross and lustful sins. Do not let us shut our eyes to the fact that these assail the heart of the Christian. Thoughts that make the pure heart shudder may attack the soul of the believer; and when they find a lodgment they defile the whole circle in which you move. Oh, watch and pray against every thought and word that would bring the shadow of a taint of defilement into the atmosphere which you create!

And then I come upon this remarkable word, a "profane person," and I pause as I see how the author enlarges upon it—as though this represented the main peril of the Church.

What does he mean? Who is this "Bebēlos," this profane person whose presence you are to dread in the Church?

Well, the type he chooses to illustrate his meaning is Esau, and Esau in the typical act of bartering away his birthright for a mess of pottage, forfeiting a spiritual privilege and prerogative for a present physical gratification. Esau is the man without vision—good-natured enough as long as you give him plenty of sport, and plenty to eat

and drink, but utterly devoid of high principle. He is a child of impulse, a man who never regards life as a high and serious vocation in which there are purposes of God to be found, followed, and fulfilled. There is no great harm in Esau, looked at from a certain point of view. He is simply *ungodly*. I use that term in its negative sense. He lives without God and without reference to the will of God. He has no room for God in his life and no use for Him. He will reject the will of God at any time for a savoury feast, for he has no power of self-denial. Profanity is just the negation of devoutness, of consecration. It is the irreligious, the undevout, the *secular* spirit. And I do not know of any influence you need to watch against more to-day than this. Of nothing do I know that is more likely to creep into the Christian heart or the Christian Church. What is it? Simply living without reference to the will of God, acting on your own impulse, following the bent of your own inclination. Failing to make room for God and God's will in your life—which in reality means the refusal of God and the repudiation of His will. Profanity is the spirit that begins the day and ends it without prayer, that lives as though God were not—that lives for the present and the physical and the material. It never feels a thrill of fervour and awe in the presence of the Eternal. And you may get that spirit into the Church. The undevout, commercial, frivolous spirit which is of the world—*worldly*.

Here is the outworking of the profane spirit in the Church. It comes to regard the Church as a commercial concern—so many sittings let, so many members enrolled—so many institutions which are a source of enjoyment to the members

and show a balance on the right side at the end of the year. No question of the conversion of souls! No question of holiness troubling the stagnant waters of the Church life! It takes up some piece of work, but only as a hobby, and feeling no call of God in the soul, no constraint of His love. It goes to it without prayer, without preparation of spirit, without any passion or desire. If it teaches in the Sunday-school it never pleads either with the children or for them. It is so completely absorbed in the mere machinery as altogether to miss the spiritual purpose for which the machinery exists.

And there may be a profane ministry, purely official and professional, and exercised for a living —a ministry absorbed in the technicalities of Church business without vision or call, without passion for souls, without consecration.

And there may be a profane congregation, interested in music, in association with other people, in the discussion of ethical or political or social or theological questions, in elocution and the arts of public speech, but with no sense of God, no awe, no spiritual vision, no true repentance of sin, no vows of consecration, no reverence, and no real prayer.

There is the profane spirit. Why need I enlarge? Are we not all in peril of it? Profanity is, in short, *the spirit of the world.* And we cannot measure the debt of gratitude we owe to the men who stand like bulwarks in the Church against the encroaching tide of worldliness, who are simply and persistently unworldly in their taste and habits—who realize (what is now so often forgotten) that the Christian man is to be in the world and yet not of it—that we have other and

higher pleasures—that the joys set before us are those of access to God, enjoyment of the light of His countenance, and of fellowship with Him, the hope of eternal life.

My brethren, the greatest peril that I know besetting the Church of Christ to-day is that of the secular or profane spirit, the peril of Esau—of bartering away the spiritual for the temporal, the pleasures of the soul for those of the senses. It is not the positively vicious things that I dread so much as the apparently harmless things. There is no harm in the mess of pottage: there is no poison in it. But you take it in place of the better thing—that is the harm.

Is not the fashion of the world, the ambitions of the world for comfort and ease, dress and amusement, threatening to capture the heart of professedly Christian people? Are you and I not in danger of beggaring our souls for the sake of our bodies? It is the subtle peril against which this passage and the whole of the New Testament warns us.

There is a note in this warning and illustration with which I close. We have suggested to us the difficulty—almost the impossibility—of getting back any spiritual thing when we have bartered it away. An interest in spiritual exercises, a prayerful and devout spirit, a spirit of whole-hearted earnestness in religious enthusiasm, and a godly influence over others—when these have been lost they are tremendously hard to get back! And if we only knew it, they are the most precious and lasting possessions that any man can have. Some of us have lost or are fast losing them. We may have drifted farther than we know. I tell you frankly that one of the visions that terrify

me occasionally is that of being the minister of a Church that has lost these distinctive possessions, that has failed of the grace of God, that has missed its high vocation, that has become "profane" or secular, that has about it the rattle of much machinery and no life-giving spirit; a Church from which the Spirit of God has fled as He fled from the town of Mansoul; a Church in which the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.

I am sure you will all pray that that may not be. And that it may not be, let us listen to the warning note of this passage; and in the closing weeks of this year let us hear the voice that calls to us with the flight of time: "Consider your ways, examine your own hearts." Let our earnest and eager prayer be—

"O by Thy love and anguish, Lord,
O by Thy life laid down,
Grant that we fall not from Thy grace,
Nor cast away our crown."

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